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CHOICE

Independent information for smart consumers

Tests

DVD PLAYERS
EXTERIOR PAINT
VIDEOTAPES
COOLERS
FLOWER DELIVERIES

Top 10 credit cards

Keeping food safe

79 BUBBLIES RATED $5–$225

Ready for summer?

Summer's here and the Christmas season's just around the corner, and this issue of CHOICE has the time of year firmly in its sights.

If you're planning a bit of a splurge over Christmas, do you know if you've got the right credit card for your buying — and paying — habits? You'll get the best value out of quite different cards, for example, depending on whether you pay it off in full each month or by paying interest over a longer period. See page 16 for the top 10 cards for each spending style.

Thinking of painting your house over summer? Our ongoing test of exterior paints (page 43) has already weeded out nine paints that haven't stood the test of time.

If you're considering sending anyone flowers for Christmas you might be a bit surprised at the results of our test of flower delivery services (page 26). Around half of the bouquets arrived late, one two days early, and one went to the wrong address. So if you say it with flowers, to be on the safe side, say it some other way too.

Thinking of treating yourself to a DVD player this Christmas? Our test of 13 models will make sure you get a good one, as well as giving all the lowdown on hooking it up to your entertainment system (page 35).

Summer's a good time for bacteria too — particularly those that cause food poisoning. Use our quiz on page 22 to find out how much you know about keeping food safe in the hot weather. And our test of coolers (page 46) will help you put the knowledge into practice when you're taking food to the beach or a picnic.

Last but not least, there's our expert taste test of 79 sparkling wines and champagnes, ranging in price from $5 to $225 (page 9). There's something there for everyone for a Christmas tipple or toast. CHOICE raises its glass to you and wishes you, your family and friends a happy Christmas and peaceful and healthy New Year.

Jane Mackenzie, Editor

CHOICE

is published by the Australian Consumers' Association

YOUR LETTERS

We welcome the letters you send us — please always include a daytime telephone number so we can contact you quickly if we want to follow up your letter. We're sorry we can't answer every letter we receive, but we do use them in our research. Thanks for taking the time to keep in touch.

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If you're a current personal CHOICE subscriber you can have free trial access to our website. Just call Consumer Services on (02) 9577 3399 and have your email address ready. As well as finding all the articles in CHOICE there, you can use COMPARE A PRODUCT (type in your requirements and let the database find the right model for you), participate in our forums, catch up on our latest campaigns, tell us what you think about us and order books or single reports from our shop.

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Personal subscriptions: quarterly $15.95, 1 year $63.80, 2 years $118.80.
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We are completely independent. Our income is derived solely from the sale of CHOICE and our other publications and products. All the products we subject to full testing and comparison are purchased by us in the marketplace; sometimes to get the latest model we may buy directly from a manufacturer where we can select a random sample ourselves. We never accept gifts from manufacturers or retailers; we sometimes borrow samples, especially of new products, for quick reviews or pre-evaluation before we can buy in the marketplace. We are not beholden to any commercial, government or union interests, and we don't accept advertising, paid or unpaid.

We test and rate products and services. Our ratings are usually based on quality without regard to price, and are derived from lab tests, expert judgments and reader surveys. If a product is high in quality and relatively low in price, we deem it a **Best Buy**. A rating applies only to the brand and model tested, not to other models sold under the same brand name, unless so noted. Financial information in CHOICE is of a general nature, and is not intended to be advice on individual investments.

We represent and act in consumers' interests. We lobby and campaign on behalf of consumers to promote their rights, to influence government policy, and to ensure consumer issues have a high profile in the public arena.

Membership. Subscribers can become voting members of the Consumers' Association on application. Voting membership costs $89.10 for a year (up to December 31, 2001), which covers your subscription to CHOICE with free access to CHOICE Online and a further subscription to our policy and campaigning magazine, *Consuming Interest.*

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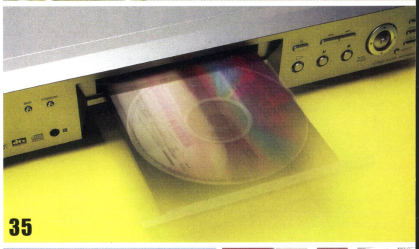
YOUR NEXT ISSUE...

...will be the combined Jan/Feb 2002 edition. You should receive it in very late January or early February.



ANNUAL BUYING GUIDE

We're doing it differently this year — instead of printing an update in the December issue of CHOICE on all the products tested over the past year that are still available, we're making it a separate publication. That way you get all of December CHOICE's pages devoted to new reports, but you can still get the year's summary if you want it.

You can find it on our website (go to www.choice.com.au and type 'CHOICE Better Buying Guide — 2011' into the search box), or write to us for a free copy: CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.

Benefits of tai chi

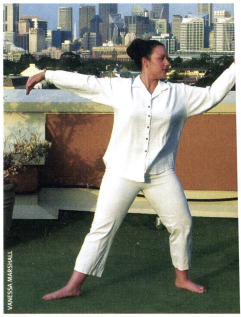
Feel like you should be doing some sort of exercise, but don't want anything too strenuous? Need to prepare yourself physically and mentally for the rigours of the Christmas season? Tai chi, a gentle exercise derived from martial arts traditions, could be what you're looking for — and more — according to November's CHOICE *Health Reader*.

Researchers have reviewed 31 different studies in English and Chinese, and found it improved cardiorespiratory function (in both healthy and chronically ill people), immune capacity, muscular strength and posture control, and reduced the number of falls among older people. It was also associated with improved mental health and lowered stress.

While it's difficult to say whether the benefits were due to tai chi or moderate exercise generally, you're more likely to stick with it if you're enjoying yourself.

Also in November *Health Reader*:

- Snoring could be a sign of impending heart disease.


VANESSA MARSHALL

- The rate of testicular cancer is on the rise, and particularly affects young men. Learn how to detect it and what your treatment options are.

To subscribe to CHOICE *Health Reader*, phone 1800 069 552.

Closing the bottle

Have you ever been surprised to see a premium bottle of riesling closed with a screw cap instead of a traditional cork? Perhaps you were disappointed at the discovery, because it gave the impression the wine was of lower quality than you expected. Or you missed the ritual of opening the bottle with a corkscrew?

Until recently winemakers had few alternatives to traditional corks for closing wine bottles. Cork has served for centuries as a wine stopper, but it's also been blamed for a major problem: cork taint (TCA or 2,4,6-trichloroanisole), a compound produced in cork under certain conditions by a specific mould that gives a pungent, mouldy smell to the wine, especially the more delicate styles such as riesling, semillon and sauvignon blanc.

To overcome this problem, different types of bottle closure have come onto the market in recent years: screw caps, synthetic closures (made from synthetic polymer material) and so-called technical corks (made of cork/cork conglomerate and a synthetic component).

But so far there's been little independent data available on how well these new types of closure — as well as traditional corks — perform, so the first results of a large comparative study by the Australian Wine Research Institute (AWRI) were eagerly anticipated.

AWRI recently released the first results of the study, 20 months after bottling semillon wine with various types of bottle closure. It found that many of the closures trialled were suitable for wine drunk young (up to 12 months after bottling), but none entirely suitable for long-term storage of wine.

For longer time periods, some types of closure seem unable to seal the bottles adequately to prevent loss of sulphur dioxide and ascorbic acid — preservatives added to prevent browning (oxidation) of the grapes and the wine.

In particular, the study found that:

- In terms of minimising sulphur dioxide loss, the screw cap tested performed best, followed by technical cork, conventional cork and synthetic closures.
- Some conventional and technical corks showed cork taint problems.
- Most synthetic closures had no problems with a plastic-type taint.
- After 18 months of storage, wine sealed with the screw cap had developed a rubber-like aroma.
- Synthetic closures are the least consumer-friendly. You need more strength to extract them from a bottle and from a corkscrew and they'e more difficult to put back into the bottle neck.

The results above only reflect how well the various closures performed up to 20 months post-bottling. But the study is ongoing, and AWRI will release new information in due course, especially if some of the closures perform less well in future.

LEADED PETROL PHASE-OUT FOR NEW YEAR

Is your car currently using leaded petrol? As of January 1, 2002, you'll have to find an alternative.

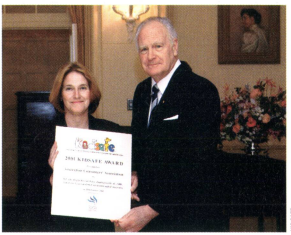
Following the lead of WA and Queensland, leaded petrol will be phased out nationally by that date and lead replacement petrol (LRP) will be available as a substitute.

If you're driving a car that was built before 1986 and designed to run on leaded petrol, you'll need to find out whether you can use unleaded fuel or have to use LRP.

Start by contacting your car's manufacturer or your mechanic to find out. If you have Web access, check the list of models suitable for unleaded petrol that's been compiled by the Australian Institute of Petroleum: www.aip.com.au/info/unleadedpetrol/unleaded.html.

ACA HONOURED WITH THE 2001 KIDSAFE AWARD

In a recent ceremony at Government House in Canberra, the Governor-General presented the Consumers' Association (publisher of CHOICE) with the 2001 Kidsafe Award in recognition of our work to improve the safety of children's cots. Kidsafe makes this award annually, its purpose being to identify and recognise outstanding contributions in products, projects and programs that help to achieve a reduction in the level of death and injury to children under 15.



KIDSAFE

Consumers' Association CEO Louise Sylvan accepting the award from H.E. The Right Rev Dr Peter Hollingworth AC OBE.

The Consumers' Association has been instrumental in the development, implementation and scrutiny of cot safety standards, and while the award is gratifying, there's still a long way to go. Our regular testing of cots reveals that a majority of those we test still don't meet the mandatory standard and are potentially dangerous.

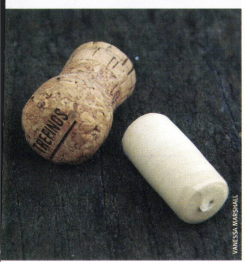
Then there's the matter of portable cots, high chairs, prams and strollers, many of which our testing shows are dangerous, and where the standard isn't mandatory. We find it strange that some of the most vulnerable people in society are the least protected when it comes to product safety. CHOICE will keep testing and pushing for safety improvements.

In accepting the award on behalf of the association, CEO Louise Sylvan said, "The Consumers' Association is absolutely delighted with this prestigious award from Kidsafe. We've been working on improving the safety of children's products over the last 15 years, and it's wonderful to have this work recognised by such an important organisation."

The Consumers' Association also acknowledges the pioneering work of Canberra Consumers and Mike Vernon in getting Standards Australia committees for many children's products set up in the 1970s, in particular the Consumer Standards Advisory Committee (CSAC).

For winemakers, the results released so far should provide interesting points to consider when choosing the closures for their wines.

See *Corked*, page 10, for how corked wines affected our tasting of sparkling wines, and what to do if you find a suspect bottle.



VANESSA MARSHALL

NO NEED TO WORRY ABOUT PPA

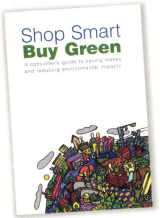
There's currently an email circulating about phenylpropanolamine (PPA) in Dimetapp and other brands of cough and cold medications and slimming pills. The email describes an increased risk of brain haemorrhage in women aged 18-49 after using products containing PPA, and includes a US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommendation that everyone (including children) seek alternatives. But the email refers to brands that contain the substance in the US, *not* in Australia.

The Australian equivalent of the FDA, the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) has advised that no products registered and sold in Australia now contain PPA; the last ones were withdrawn from sale by August this year.

Beware of buying drugs over the Internet, because the same brands produced in different countries aren't regulated the same way. In Australia, an Aust R or Aust L number on the packaging guarantees that the product is registered or listed with the TGA.

For the latest on PPA, including a link to the US FDA information, check out the TGA update at www.health.gov.au/tga/docs/html/ppa.htm.

CHOICE CUTS



Want to buy green for Christmas?

Environment Australia has published a guide that helps you compare the environmental impact of products. *Shop Smart, Buy Green* explains the typical product life-cycle of manufacture, transport, use and disposal, and helps you understand the various environmental impacts at each stage.

You can get a free copy of the booklet from Environment Australia's website: www.ea.gov.au/industry/eecp/publications/pubs/consumersguide.pdf; by calling its Community Information Unit on 1800 803 772 (toll-free); or by emailing ciu@ea.gov.au.

ISP LOYALTY

With over 600 Internet service providers (ISP) around the country, there's certainly no shortage of competition. Despite (or perhaps because of) that, it's still hard to know which ISP to sign up with if you're new to the Internet, or whether you're getting a good deal if you're already online. An annual survey published recently by our sister magazine, *Computer* CHOICE, should help you work it out.

As with our last survey, small ISPs noticeably outperformed the larger players, but this year's results show that the market has matured to a point where consumers want more than just a reliable connection — they want service too.

On the whole, results from the survey suggest:

- A willingness to move if a better deal is available.
- Failed connection attempts were far more common than last year, suggesting ISPs may be failing to keep up with increasing demand.
- Critically, people with accounts that are prepaid with no time limits or pay-by-the-hour were most likely to be happy with the cost of their service, indicating that respondents were happiest when they knew exactly how much the service cost and weren't under pressure to use a set number of hours in order to get their money's worth.

WINNERS AND LOSERS

- For trouble-free Internet access *Computer* CHOICE recommends **OPTUS** (available nationwide) and **SE NET** (for Adelaide readers).
- **MELBOURNE PC USER GROUP** and **SE NET** were outstanding in terms of satisfied customers.
- Disappointingly, **TELSTRA** was noteworthy only for its high levels of technical problems and dissatisfied customers.

There's a lot more detail in the November/December issue of *Computer* CHOICE. To subscribe, see page 49 or call 1800 069 552.

VANESSA MARSHALL

Dangerous lighters

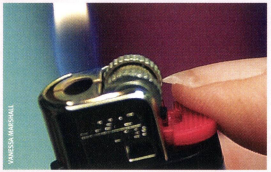
Cheap disposable cigarette lighters that could explode in hot weather are available in Australian shops. The warning comes after independent laboratory tests on 11 brands of lighter currently available in Australia caused most of them to crack, leak gas, shatter or even explode when exposed to temperatures of just 54°C — a temperature you could expect inside a car on a hot summer's day.

There seem to be no visual clues as to which lighters might be dangerous, so buying a reputable brand of disposable cigarette lighter, rather than a cheaper variety from bargain basement stores, probably gives you a better chance of getting one that's safe to use. Even then it's best not to leave a lighter somewhere it can heat up, such as on the dashboard of your car.

Disposable lighters are required to carry a warning label stating "never expose to heat above 50°C or to prolonged sunlight", but some people may not realise parts of their car can reach these temperatures, even if they read the warning.

In Australia, many of the forty million disposable cigarette lighters sold every year are reckoned to be poor-quality imports. There's a mandatory Consumer Product Safety Standard, based on the US model for cheap disposable cigarette lighters, that's been in place since October 1997; and a comprehensive Australian standard, based on the US model and an ISO standard, is being finalised by Standards Australia, but this will be voluntary.

Despite this, dangerous lighters are still being sold. The ACCC and state fair trading departments monitor the marketplace for them. In recent years, NSW Fair Trading has prosecuted an importer and a major discount retailer for breaches of the current regulations. NSW has also instigated a number of voluntary recalls, in which importers have issued recall notices urging the public to dispose of lighters that don't comply with the regulations. The maximum penalty for such breaches is $1.1 million for corporations.


VANESSA MARSHALL

YOUR LETTERS

Taxing insurance

Your September house and contents insurance cover story was very opportune. Insurance premiums are certainly rising, as you said, and a good part of the increase is due to government taxes, both state and federal, loaded onto those who choose to insure.

The figure you quoted of 30% of Australian households not being insured confirms the point I've been trying to make to the NSW Government: that the taxes are an unfair burden on the insured. The fire service levy is particularly harsh. This should, of course, be charged as an addition to council rates so it's shared fairly, but I understand the Local Government and Shires Association has resisted.

Governments should encourage house owners to insure to avoid such situations as you describe each time there's a major bushfire or storm. How much encouragement is there when taxes add *more than 50%* to the insurance premium, as was the case with the premium we paid in August this year?

Keith Groves
Elanora Heights, NSW

Spreading the word on towball ratings

Thank you, consumer magazine. Your article on towing problems (CHOICE, August 2001, page 4) couldn't have been more timely. I'd just agreed to buy a Jeep Cherokee Sports to tow my double horse float when your article prompted me to check with my broker just what the down weight was on the towball. It turned out that the Jeep I'd chosen only had a down weight of 120 kg, even though it could tow over two tonnes.

After checking with the towbar fitter, I found out there are very few 4WDs nowadays that are able to tow a horse float. It seems the chassis design of the modern 4WDs isn't suitable for heavy down weights. After going through his book, the very helpful man identified only the Land Cruiser, Jeep Grand Cherokee and Mitsubishi Challenger, plus older models of the Nissan Patrol, Mitsubishi Pajero and Land Rover Discovery.

As I neither wanted an older model nor a pricy, big 4WD, I eventually settled for the Challenger, which I'm happy to say does the job very well. Now, how do I inform all my friends in our equestrian group that they may be either towing illegally and/or potentially causing some very serious damage to their expensive 4WDs?

Julie Goff
Via Internet

Thanks for letting us know our brief report saved you from buying an inappropriate car. Nissan failed to respond to our inquiry, but all the other manufacturers of the 4WDs mentioned confirmed the information in Julie's letter. Mitsubishi also said that its new Pajero NM series could tow a horse float, if it's fitted with a weight-distributing hitch.

Safety switches and socket covers

I recently nearly lost my son when he stuck two keys into a power point.

I was under the misconception that having a safety switch — or earth leakage circuit breaker, as they're sometimes called — was all the protection I needed as far as electrical safety is concerned. I couldn't understand why the safety switch didn't cut off all power to my house when the accident occurred, as I was led to believe it should.

May I suggest to your readers that using plug-in power point covers is just as important as having a safety switch? My story has a happy ending: my son only received a minor burn to his finger. But the hospital staff tell me he's indeed very lucky to be alive.

Joan Desira
Seven Hills, NSW

There's no absolute guarantee that a safety switch makes an electrical system safe. It can become ineffective if the switch is installed wrongly, if a non-professional changes the wiring system, or if wires are damaged during house renovations.

A correctly installed safety switch that hasn't been affected by any of the above conditions should trip if contact is made with the live terminal. In such a case, the person may still feel a shock, but it won't be as severe as in the case of an unprotected circuit.

You can check whether your safety switch works properly. Just press the test button and when the power goes off, turn it back on. As you may have to reset some clocks after this, check your safety switch twice a year when you reset your clocks for daylight saving anyway. If it doesn't work, contact the manufacturer and ask them to check it.

The best protection is not to touch any of the three terminals, and if there are children around, to use protective covers on socket outlets.

THUMBS UP

▮ David Lang of Frenchs Forest, NSW, awards a thumbs-up to **PUMP SUPPLIES**, which replaced free a defunct pump — it was still under the manufacturer's warranty but had been taken off the market — with a better and more expensive brand.

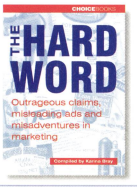
▮ Ann McDonald of Budgewoi, NSW, is pleased with the $5 gift voucher **UNCLE TOBY'S** sent her when she told the company that a Cup-a-soup packet had very little powdered flavouring.

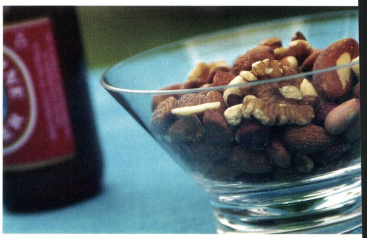
LETTER OF THE MONTH

We want to hear from you — your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. Positive outcomes you've had to a complaint you took to a manufacturer, retailer, importer or tradesperson interest us, too. Address these letters to *Thumbs Up* at the address on page 2.

To thank you for writing to us, *Your Letters* awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'. This month's winner, Keith Groves of Elanora Heights, NSW, receives *The Hard Word*, or any other book of his choice from Consumer Bookshelf, pages 40 to 42.

We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract. See page 2 for how to reach us.


CHOICE BOOKS
THE HARD WORD
Outrageous claims, misleading ads and misadventures in marketing
Compiled by Kennedy Story



NUTRITION TIP: CAROB OR CHOCOLATE?

Carob's often touted as a healthy alternative to chocolate, but it's just not so. True, it doesn't contain caffeine, but carob bars have just as much fat and sugar as regular chocolate, so don't be fooled.

HOW TO SPOT A FRESH FISH FILLET

Fresh fillets should be glossy, translucent and have pale, wet flesh — and they shouldn't smell of anything, certainly not of fish. Give them a poke and the flesh should spring back.

Stale fillets are smelly, dry and grey, yellow, dull pink or orange. The flesh won't spring back and the flakes may even separate when you poke them.

And how long should they keep? Think of it this way — fish will last for 12 days from the time it's landed on the boat, provided it's kept in optimum conditions at 0°C. But for every hour it's kept at room temperature, it loses a day's freshness. It's probably best to eat it the day you buy it.

The right nuts

It's time for Christmas drinks — and the snacks that go with them. While you're scooping up handfuls of nuts, can you kid yourself it's healthy food?

For once the answer's yes, as long as you don't eat too many and stay away from nuts cooked in oil. While you're correct in thinking nuts themselves are high in fat, it's mostly unsaturated fat (peanuts, cashews and almonds have lots of monounsaturated fat, while walnuts are rich in omega-3 fats), which helps keep cholesterol down and your heart healthy. Nuts are also high in protein, dietary fibre, Vitamin E (an antioxidant) and other useful vitamins, as well as containing phytochemicals (other chemicals from plants that are thought to be useful in the diet) and minerals.

The trick is to replace some of the saturated fat in your diet with the unsaturated fat in nuts, rather than in addition to it. Pick unsalted nuts too if you're trying to reduce your salt intake.

'Fat-free' claims

'Fat-free' claims can be persuasive if you're trying to make healthy food choices, but like most marketing speak they can be deceptive. Currently foods with a '% fat-free' claim should be a low-fat food, which means they can't have more than 3% total fat (1.5% total fat if it's a liquid).

Despite this, many food companies are using this claim for fattier foods. **ARNOTT'S** is advertising '94% fat-free' rice shapes and '93% fat-free' rice chips, and **SHAPE** cheese is claiming '93% fat-free'. That's 6% or 7% fat, which is definitely not a low-fat food.

The Australia New Zealand Food Authority (ANZFA) is currently reviewing what claims products can make about nutrients and the effectiveness of the current industry-managed regulations. Our quick look around the supermarket aisles shows industry isn't even complying with the current requirements. The best option would be to get rid of 'fat-free' claims altogether: they're of questionable benefit to consumers, especially when abused.

'% fat-free' claims have been around long enough now for us to start treating them with the contempt they deserve as nothing more than marketing speak. If you see one on a label, simply work out from it how much fat *is* in the product; anything more than 3% isn't a low-fat choice.

BUBBLY, anyone?

Are you after a good bottle of sparkling wine that won't break your budget? A decent but cheaper bubbly to take to a picnic? A high-quality champagne to savour and impress with? Or a sparkling red to enjoy on a summer's afternoon? No matter which style of wine you're after — as long as it's sparkling, we've got it covered.

For our latest taste test, five wine experts (three winemakers, a consultant and a retailer) tasted more than six dozen sparkling wines: 21 selling for more than $20, 51 that cost less and seven sparkling reds. Their scores and tasting comments in the table that starts on page 13 should help take the guesswork out of finding a bottle you like when you're faced with dozens at the bottle shop.

GOOD STUFF AT LOW COST

As a group, the less expensive sparkling wines compared quite well with those that cost between $10 and $20. In fact, two of the three top-scoring wines in the two lower price brackets cost less than $10 — the $5 **MATTHEW LANG Brut Cuvée** and the $8 **WYNDHAM ESTATE Vintage Brut 2000**. These two, and the top-scoring wine in the $10–$20 price bracket (**KILLAWARRA Vintage Pinot Noir Chardonnay 1997**) impressed the experts with their complexity, displaying some traditional toast and yeast aromas and flavours. The latter may be difficult to find, though, as the 1998 vintage has since come onto the market.

Half the wines under $20 were rated comparatively well, receiving scores between 15.5 and 16.5 points. About a third had scores below that, but above 14; these wines are still generally considered "clean, safe, commercial", but nothing to write home about.

AT THE TOP END

Not surprisingly, French champagnes dominated the other end of the price scale, and as a group they rated pretty well. The champagnes in our test cost around $75 a bottle on average, excluding the $224 **MOET & CHANDON Cuvée Dom Perignon 1993**. For that sort of money you can expect a "powerful", "complex", "classy" and "elegant" drop, to name just some of the terms the experts used frequently when commenting on these wines.

The top-scoring **POMMERY Champagne** even received a score equivalent to a gold medal at a wine show (18.5–20). It impressed the experts much more than some other French champagnes and, at around $53, costs a good deal less than some of the others. The $224 **Dom Perignon** noted

LITE WEGMANN

A fresh aperitif, a good food wine or a fun sparkling red? Our report reveals which sparkling wines between $5 and $225 are worth a sip.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Five wine experts** *tasted and rated 79 different sparkling wines and champagnes from Australia, New Zealand and France.*
- **You don't have** *to spend big for a good bottle of sparkling wine. A $5 bottle leads the pack of the lower-priced bubblies.*
- **Even if** *you're out to impress with a genuine champagne, there's no need to break the bank. The best of the premium drops in the test costs well below the average in its class.*

above, for example, 'only' scored 17 (still a silver medal rating), and while the $130 **BOLLINGER Grande Année 1992** had some high scores, it also had some pretty low ones — the experts couldn't agree on a consensus score, so it finished up in the 'mixed emotions' category.

CHOOSING YOUR DROP

The table lists all 79 sparkling wines by rank order in four groups: up to $10, $10–$20, more than $20 and sparkling reds. 'Mixed emotions' wines (where the experts couldn't agree on a consensus score) are listed in alphabetical order at the end of each group with the range of scores given to them. If you're adventurous, give the ones with some higher scores a try; the tasting notes should give you an indication of the style of wine and its characteristics, and so whether you might like it.

We've also compiled our traditional CHOICE Mixed Dozen — a selection of top wines from each price bracket: three from the under $10 wines, four of the $10–$20 bracket (excluding the top-scoring one that may be difficult to find, as the next year's vintage has now been released), the top three champagnes, a well-priced New Zealand sparkling that scored better than some of the French drops, and a sparkling red that's good value for money. ■

CORKED

You may not know straightaway what 2,4,6-trichloroanisole (TCA) is, but if you like wine, you'll have tasted or heard of cork taint, the mouldy, musty smell or taste of 'corked' wine. TCA is a compound that's formed from the phenols found in all plants. These combine with chlorine during cork production and, in some, a mould converts the chlorophenols to TCA. The smallest trace can contaminate the wine, especially the more delicate white styles (see *Choice Cuts*, page 4, for more on corks and alternatives).

While TCA is mostly associated with flawed corks, it can also originate elsewhere from material treated with trichlorophenol as a preservative (now banned): cardboard cases, wooden palettes or wood used in the construction of wine cellars, from where it can spread around the cellar. The original source of TCA contamination is very hard to pinpoint.

Some estimates put the level of wine affected by cork taint at around 3–5%; others think it's higher. In our tasting this year, the experts suspected 7% of the sparkling wines and champagnes were corked. Even more suspects (10%) were among the white and red table wines we tasted at the same time for our forthcoming wine guide.

By the way, a 'corked' wine wasn't rated; the experts called for a second bottle and based their scores on that one. And if the second bottle was thought to be corked, too, we took it out of the test. It happened once, with the **BANROCK STATION Sparkling Chardonnay**, but the non-expert panel that tasted a third bottle rated it quite well, which shows that cork taint can affect certain bottles, not necessarily batches.

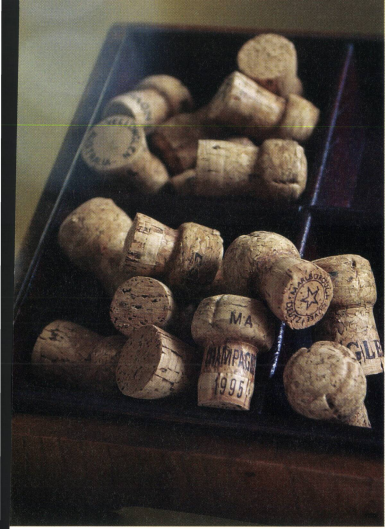
While you may lack the confidence to identify a slight cork taint correctly, don't just accept a faulty wine as bad luck. If it smells off or tastes flat, musty or cardboardy, ask for a new bottle in a restaurant, or return the full bottle to the bottle shop for a refund. Most winemakers and retailers encourage this, rather than having you blame and avoid the wine forever.

THE CHOICE MIXED DOZEN

		Price ($)
Less than $10		
$$	MATTHEW LANG Brut Cuvée	5.00
$$	WYNDHAM ESTATE Vintage Brut 2000	8.00
$$	SEPPELT Great Western Grande Reserve	7.00
Between $10 and $20		
$$	BLUES POINT Brut Reserve	9.00*
	LINDAUER Brut	14.50
	ORLANDO Trilogy Pinot Noir Chardonnay Pinot Meunier	13.00
	YELLOWGLEN Y	20.00
More than $20		
	POMMERY Champagne	53.00
	MOET & CHANDON Brut Imperial Champagne 1995	100.00
	POL ROGER Champagne Brut	56.00
$$	DEUTZ Marlborough Cuvée Brut	22.00
Sparkling red		
$$	BANROCK STATION Sparkling Shiraz	11.55

* This was more than $10 when we bought it, so it was tasted in that category — which makes it quite a bargain.

Prices are the lowest we found, based on checks in two or more major Sydney retail stores in September 2001. Shop around for the best deal, and watch out for specials. **$$** denotes good value in this price bracket.



Expert vs amateur taste

Do you like your bubbly light and fruity or complex and rich? Smelling of peach and lemon or Vegemite and toast? Tasting of fragrant fruit, toffee and spice or smoky bacon? These are only a few of the many aromas and flavours experts can find in a good sparkling wine. All are acceptable, but perhaps not all to your liking. The tasting notes in the table, page 13, give you an idea of how the experts described each wine. They're trained to ignore personal preferences and identify a multitude of flavours and aromas, outstanding attributes or shortcomings. But do ordinary consumers rate the same wines highly?

To find out, we also had a lay panel taste some of the wines the experts had rated highly, poorly or couldn't agree upon. Interestingly, both groups liked POMMERY Champagne the best. The lay panel also liked SEPPELT SALINGER Méthode Champenoise 1994, which the experts had mixed feelings about; DEUTZ Marlborough Cuvée Brut, MATTHEW LANG Brut Cuvée and WYNDHAM ESTATE Vintage Brut 2000, which are in the CHOICE Mixed Dozen; and agreed with the experts in not liking WINDY PEAK Prestige and YALDARA WINES Gold Label Brut much. However, their impressions and scores didn't always mirror the experts'. The COCKATOO RIDGE NV Brut Sparkling Cuvée and CARRINGTON Brut Reserve Special Cuvée appealed more to the lay panel than the experts, and the KILLAWARRA Vintage Pinot Noir Chardonnay 1997 vice versa.

Vintage, NV, RD and best before

Vintage is the term used for the annual grape harvest. It also applies to a wine made of grapes that mainly (at least 85%) come from a particular year's harvest. It can still be made from different base wines from different areas, but the grapes would have been harvested in that particular year.

Climatic factors like frost, sun, rain and heat affect the quality and characteristics of the grape harvest. If a particular vintage proves consistently good, winemakers are more likely to produce vintage wines from that year.

Non-vintage wines, on the other hand, are a blend of base wines from more than one year. They may have the letters NV on their labels, but not necessarily. If there's no year displayed on the label, though, you can be pretty sure it's non-vintage. Blending base wines from different years allows winemakers to keep certain 'house' styles consistent and make good-quality non-vintage wines.

In our taste test 20 sparkling wines were vintages. The Australian and New Zealand vintages were primarily of more recent years (1997–2000) than then French (1992–95).

Some champagnes from special vintage years may also have the letters RD in addition to the vintage year on their label. It stands for **'recently disgorged'**, when the final sediment is taken off and the bottle is recorked. Good champagne can last for many years before disgorgement, but it should be drunk pretty soon afterwards, as exposure to air speeds up the oxidation process — it'll go off sooner.

In fact, the longer the champagne has been kept before disgorgement, the faster it'll deteriorate afterwards. So a 50-year-old classic vintage may still taste almost fresh and lively when disgorged, but could turn dull and aged within a few weeks of being recorked.

Apart from a few exceptions — which an expert would be able to point out — sparkling wines and champagnes are meant to be drunk as soon as possible after they're released. They won't improve and can deteriorate with age. But unfortunately there's no way of knowing when they were released on the market (it can be the year of the vintage or some years later) and for how long they've been languishing on retailers' shelves.

In our 1996 test quite a few bottles showed an unusually 'developed' taste — especially some champagnes which had been known to be better and fresher in the past. Only one bottle in that test had a **'best enjoyed before'** date printed on the label at the back of the bottle: **GRANDIN Brut**. We commended the distributor for its initiative, hoping more Australian sparkling wine producers and distributors would follow suit.

Five years later, however, there've been no labelling improvements. And **GRANDIN Brut** seems to have taken a step back. While it still advises consumers on the back of the bottle that it's best drunk within 15 months of disgorgement, you have to make a special effort to find the date of disgorgement. On the bottle we bought it's printed nowhere on the label but, looking hard for it with reading glasses on, we found a very small, dark imprint on the dark green bottle — 00-15-03 — that could represent a date. If so, it was just past its best when we bought it in July 2001.

OUR THANKS TO THE EXPERT TASTERS

VANESSA MARSHALL

Clockwise from top centre: Peter Bourne, wine consultant; Louisa Rose, winemaker, Yalumba; Matthew White, wine retailer, Woolworths; Neville Rowe, winemaker, Domaine Chandon; Ed Carr, winemaker, BRL Hardy.

SPARKLING RED

Shiraz is the grape most commonly used for a sparkling red: it can produce a soft, rich wine full of flavours and without too much tannin. Previously often called sparkling burgundy, this unique type of wine has been made in Australia since the 1880s. It's becoming more popular now — the number of winemakers producing a sparkling red has risen from less than a handful a few years ago to more than 50.

To get a brief idea of the style and quality of the sparkling reds on the market, we included a few in this year's test. Three received relatively good scores and of these, the **BANROCK STATION Sparkling Shiraz** ***is best value for money.***

(A) *The 2001 vintage has since come onto the market, but it made to the same style. You may find both in shops.*

(B) *The 2000 vintage is now on the market for around $8.*

(C) *The 1998 vintage is now on the market for around $13.*

(D) *The 2000 vintage is now on the market for around $16.*

(E) *We bought it for less than $10, so it was tasted in that category.*

(F) *We bought it for more than $10, so it was tasted in that category — which makes the Blues Point Brut Reserve quite a bargain with its good score.*

(G) *This brand's formulation has been changed slightly since our test, and it now has 10.5% alcohol and only sulphur dioxide (220) added. The manufacturer assured us the changes won't affect the wine's style or taste. You may find both versions on the market.*

1 Score

Each expert gave the wines a score out of a maximum of 20, according to the international show-scoring system for wines: 3 for appearance, 7 for 'nose' and 10 for 'palate'.

They didn't know which wine they were tasting, only whether it cost up to $10, $10–$20, or more than $20. While they used the same benchmarks for judging all the wines, they were probably a bit harsher in their judgment of the $20+ wines. So the scores are only comparable within, not between, the price brackets.

The score printed in the table is the panellists' consensus score reached after the tasting, when they discussed the wines and their individual scores — still without knowing what the wines were. When a wine received too wide a range of scores and no consensus could be reached, we called it a *Mixed emotion*. Two tasters' quotes are included in the tasting notes for these wines — see whether any of them might appeal to you.

2 Target price

The experts tasted the wines in the price brackets listed in the table. When we checked prices again before publication, many (especially the higher-priced bottles) had risen quite considerably, while a few others had gone down. That's why you may find a $9 bottle in the $10–20 price bracket.

We checked most prices in two or more major Sydney retail stores in September 2001. The price listed is the lowest we found. Shop around for the best deal, and watch out for specials.

3 Additives

All the champagnes and sparkling wines contain sulphur dioxide (220), which prevents browning of the grapes (oxidation) and acts as a preservative. Many asthmatics are sensitive to it and it could cause an attack. As a rule, champagnes and sparkling wines contain less than still white wines, because the carbon dioxide is a natural preservative.

Other additives include ascorbic acid (300) and erythorbic acid (315), added to prevent browning, and potassium sorbate (202), a preservative.

4 Tasting notes

These are compiled from the experts' tasting notes. Combined with the scores, they should give you a good indication of the wines' style, aroma and flavour.

VANESSA MARSHALL

GETTING THE BEST FROM BUBBLY

- Buy your wine from a reputable supplier that can be seen to have a high stock turnover, regularly rotates their stock and stores it under favourable conditions — away from the sun, other heat sources or fluorescent lights.
- Sparkling wines and champagnes are best when released and they generally *don't* get better with age, so buy them when you're ready to drink them.
- If you're not drinking it immediately, store sparkling like other wines: horizontally in a cool, dark and dry place away from vibration and temperature variations.
- Serve it chilled, not freezing cold. To chill it, put it in the fridge for a few hours or in a bucket of ice and water for around 30 minutes. A good handful of salt in the ice water mixture will cool it down even faster.
- To open, hold the bottle and twist it gently to ease out the cork. If you let it pop, you'll not only lose some wine but also some of the fizz.
- Long-stemmed tulip or flute-shaped glasses are best for savouring the aroma and lasting bubbles. Pour the wine against the side of the tilted glass, not down into the centre.
- For best results, use clean (no detergent residues) and cold glasses. If they aren't cold, pour a little into each glass first. As it froths and foams, it'll cool the glass down.
- Recorked (with an ordinary wine-bottle cork or a champagne stopper) and refrigerated, an open bottle that's half-full or more should keep for several days.

Brand	1 Score	2 Target price	Origin	Alcohol (%)	3 Additives	4 Tasting notes
Up to $10 (in rank order)						
MATTHEW LANG Brut Cuvée	17	5.00	Australia	11.5 **(G)**	220, 315 **(G)**	Pale lemon colour, vigorous mousse; toasty, honey, biscuit and smoky aromas; slightly spicy flavours with some yeast, complex, attractive, elegant — "seriously good value for money"
WYNDHAM ESTATE Vintage Brut 2000 **(A)**	17	8.00	Australia	12	220, 315	Pale lemon colour; buttery toast, honey and malt biscuit aromas with woody/smoky notes; sweet peach, malt and toasty flavours, complex, long palate, clean, tangy finish — "seriously good at this price point"
SEPPELT Great Western Grande Reserve	16	7.00	Australia	11.5	220, 315	Pale straw colour, tight, fine mousse; slight bready aroma with fruity and flowery notes; flavours of candied and fresh fruits, toast and Vegemite — "attractive, well-made style"
CARRINGTON Vintage Brut 2000	15.5	6.70	Australia	12	220	Mid-straw colour; nutty, bready nose with slightly herbal notes; honey toast and candied fruit flavours, full, rich style — "good food style"
HARDYS R & R Regional Reserve Classic Cuvée	15.5	7.30	Australia	11	220, 300	Very pale straw colour; citrus, pine, jasmine and rose petal aromas; creamy on the palate, sweet, crisp and fresh — "good, slightly sweeter style"
MINCHINBURY Brut De Brut Private Cuvée	15.5	5.00	Australia	11.5	220, 315	Mid-gold colour; buttered toast, toffee, apple aromas and a 'meaty' note; big, full, rich on the palate, clean finish — "simple wine in a sweeter style"
MINCHINBURY Brut Private Cuvée	15.5	5.00	Australia	10.5	220	Pale straw colour; lychee aroma with hints of musk; well-structured, fruit-driven aperitif style, lemon flavours, good finish — "dry, clean, fresh"
QUEEN ADELAIDE Brut	15.5	6.00	Australia	10.5	220	Pale straw colour; light and dusty aromas of toast and strawberry; fresh, fruit palate with citrus flavours — "simple flavours but good balance"
REDBANK Emily Pinot Noir Chardonnay Brut Cuvée	15.5	12.00 **(E)**	Australia	12	220, 300	Pale old gold colour; vanilla, toast/cereal, confectionery/jammy aromas; slightly nutty flavours with some complexity on the palate — "lacking a bit of spine"
SEAVIEW Brut	15.5	7.00	Australia	11.5	220	Pale onion-skin colour; slightly confectionery aromas; bready flavours with hints of malt, fresh palate — "easy drinking with some complexity"
SEAVIEW Grande Cuvée	15.5	7.00	Australia	12	220	Pale onion-skin colour; toasty, peachy, nutty aromas; lingering yeasty flavours, slightly creamy texture — "a more complex 'bready' style of wine"
ANGAS BRUT Chardonnay Pinot Noir	15	7.00	Australia	12	220, 300	Straw-coloured/bronze; bacon/salami, vanilla and banana aromas; nutty flavours, 'disjointed' palate, short finish — "a little short and simple"
GLASS MOUNTAIN Classic Brut	15	9.30	Australia	12	220, 315	Pale gold colour with green hues; aromas of jasmine, rose petals and waxed paper; sweet, spicy and aromatic flavours — "definite sweeter style"
LINDEMANS Bin 25 Chardonnay Brut 1999 **(B)**	15	9.00	Australia	12.5	220, 315	Pale gold colour and a fine mousse; bready, pencil shaving and sweet confectionery aromas; soft, full and rounded palate, well balanced — "simple wine in a sweeter style"
MINCHINBURY White Seal Private Cuvée	15	5.00	Australia	10.5	220	Light straw colour; excellent fine mousse; citrus, peach and floral aromas; sweet and rounded fruit flavours, well-balanced — "commercial crowd pleaser"
CARRINGTON Brut Reserve Special Cuvée	14.5	6.70	Australia	11.5	220, 300	Mid-straw colour; nutty, cashew and yeasty aromas; good acid and fruit balance, soft palate, good easy mouthful — "some depth and interest"
COCKATOO RIDGE NV Brut Sparkling Cuvée	14.5	10.00	Australia	12.5	220, 300	Pale bronze/pink colour; strawberry aroma with slight caramel notes; strawberry and bready flavours, relatively simple and short — "lacking in style and finesse"
YALDARA WINES Gold Label Brut	14.5	4.95	Australia	10.5	202, 220	Straw/gold colour; slightly herbal aroma with melon/citrus notes and yeasty complexity; savoury, nutty flavours, simple palate — "old-fashioned style"
MIXED EMOTIONS (in alphabetical order)						
KILLAWARRA Brut K	13–16.5	9.50	Aust / NZ (2%)	11.5	220	Deep straw/bronze colour; complex yeast, butterscotch and bottle-aged aromas; creamy texture, some fruit flavour, but lacks freshness — "developed", "showing interest and flavour"
SEPPELT Great Western Brut Reserve	15–18	7.00	Australia	11.5	220, 315	Pale straw colour; fresh lemon zest and apricot aromas; citrus and stone fruit flavours, crisp acid and a bit of depth — "shows both freshness and some complexity", "commercial"
SEPPELT Great Western Imperial Reserve	14.5–17.5	7.00	Australia	10.5	220	Pale straw colour with a green hue, creamy mousse; nutty cashew and cake batter aromas; fresh pear and apple flavours, good finish — "fresh aperitif style with some character", "short, lean"
SEAVIEW Brut De Brut	14.5–17.5	7.00	Australia	11.5	220	Pale bronze colour; toasty/brioche nose with hints of bacon; dry toast, whole biscuit and some complex soy bean and Vegemite flavours — "bubbles with grunt", "lacks freshness"
$10 TO $20 (in rank order)						
KILLAWARRA Vintage Pinot Noir Chardonnay 1997 **(C)**	17	14.95	Australia	12	220	Mid-straw colour; fresh lemon and toast and yeast aromas; nutty, lemon juice and nougat flavours, bitter finish — "fine and complex"
BLUES POINT Brut Reserve	16.5	9.00 **(F)**	Australia	11.5	220, 315	Mid-straw colour; candied honey, soy bean and lanolin aromas; creamy texture, strong biscuit/bread flavours — "good complexity and length"
LINDAUER Brut	16.5	14.50	NZ	12	220, 300	Pale old gold colour with brown tints; developed candied fruit, toast, nutty and strawberry aromas; ripe fruits and yeasty flavours, rich, long structure, good acid — "finish lets down an excellent wine"
ORLANDO Trilogy Pinot Noir Chardonnay Pinot Meunier	16.5	13.00	Australia	12.5	220, 300	Pale gold colour and a fine, soft mousse; candy floss, toffee, toast and slightly lemony aromas; herbal and candied fruit flavours, developed and complex — "delicate style of wine"
YELLOWGLEN Y	16.5	20.00	Australia	11.6	220, 300	Light straw colour; yeasty aromas with light honeysuckle, white peach and citrus elements; creamy, nutty, cashew, citrus and stone fruit flavours — "fine and elegant but a bit too much bottle age"
ANDREW GARRETT Chardonnay Pinot Noir 1997	16	17.00	Australia	11.5	220, 300	Mid-straw colour; fruity and yeasty aromas; good balance of fruit flavours and texture on the palate — "finishes a bit harsh"
SEAVIEW Pinot Noir Chardonnay Vintage Reserve Brut 1998	16	18.00	Australia	12.5	220	Mid-straw colour with some gold; aromas of mandarin peel, toast and mushroom with a spearmint/ menthol lift; loads of fruit complexity, hard finish — "simple textures with some interesting flavours"
SIR JAMES Cuvée Brut Pinot Noir Chardonnay	16	12.00	Australia	12	220, 300	Deeper yellow/dark straw colour; toffee, toasty and candied fruit aromas; fuller-flavoured, savoury, toasty, food style — "a more serious style"

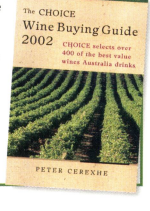
Brand	1 Score	2 Target price	Origin	Alcohol (%)	3 Additives	4 Tasting notes
YARRA BURN 1999	16	20.00	Australia	12.5	220, 300	Pale gold colour with bronze/copper tinge; earthy, nutty, candied fruit peel and strawberry aromas; full, rich, sweet, developed flavours, creamy texture — "simple style with good length and texture"
YELLOWGLEN	16	15.50	Australia	11.5	220, 300	Light straw colour with a vigorous mousse; biscuity/toast/Vegemite aromas; yeasty, lemony palate — "elegant, fresh aperitif style"
GRANDIN Brut	15.5	14.00	France	11.5	220, 300	Very pale white-gold colour; aromas of dried fruits, citrus, white peach and lanolin; rich, full, savoury palate — "good food style"
OMNI NV	15.5	10.30	Australia	11.5	220, 300	Pale lemon colour; aromas of mandarin peel, peach, spirit, yeast and white flowers; zesty and clean on palate, short — "delicious but too simple"
SEAVIEW Chardonnay Vintage Reserve Blanc De Blanc 1998	15.5	17.50	Australia	12.5	220	Mid-straw colour; dusty blue cheese and floral fruit aromas; lemony fruit flavours, a bit simple and swee on the palate — "nice lemony fruit spoilt by bitterness on the finish"
SIR JAMES Brut De Brut Pinot Noir Chardonnay	15.5	13.00	Australia	12	220, 300	Light straw colour; fruity, low-yeast nose; fruity, soft, cheesy palate, creamy texture — "some complex
TALTARNI Brut Taché 1999	15.5	18.00	Australia	13	220	Pale salmon pink colour; aromas and flavours of red berry fruits and rose petals, a little confectionery-li a bit hard — "fresh, crisp and easy on the palate"
WOLF BLASS Chardonnay Pinot Noir NV Traditional Method	15.5	13.50	Australia	11	220, 300	Mid-straw colour with a vigorous mousse; enticing, perfumed, sherbet, apples and Vegemite aromas; so palate of ripe fruit (peach, melon and mandarin peel) — "simple, fresh and elegant"
WOLF BLASS Vintage Pinot Noir Chardonnay 1998	15.5	18.00	Australia	11.5	220, 300	Pale straw colour with good mousse; citrus and honeysuckle aromas with simple yeasty notes; fresh lemony flavours, rich and round palate, a little hard on the finish — "attractive aperitif"
WYNDHAM ESTATE Vintage Chardonnay Brut 1999 **(D)**	15.5	14.05	Australia	12	220, 300, 315	Dark straw colour; aromas of lemon drops and wild honey, mineral and plastic with chalky and toasty notes; well-balanced, lean, lemony/apple flavours, aperitif style — "good, lingering finish"
ANDREW GARRETT Pinot Noir Chardonnay	15	13.50	Australia	12	220, 300	Pale bronze/copper colour; aromas of vanilla and candied fruit pastilles; strawberry flavours, tighter and tannic on the palate — "sweet and sour"
JACOB'S CREEK Chardonnay Pinot Noir Brut Cuvée	15	8.00 **(F)**	Australia	12	220, 300	Mid-straw/gold colour; lemon drops aromas with some cardboard/plastic bag notes; simple, sweet and sour palate, bitter finish — "rich, developed style but too hollow and short"
McWILLIAM'S HANWOOD Pinot Noir Chardonnay Brut	15	10.00	Australia	11	220, 300	Light-straw colour; unattractive smoked meats, dough yeast, medicinal aromas; nutty, cheesy and rubber flavours, lacking fruit sweetness — "a touch coarse and bitter"
POETS CORNER PC Pinot Noir Chardonnay	15	13.50	Australia	12	220, 300	Mid-yellow gold colour; toasty, yeast, nutty, soy sauce and meaty aromas; intense flavours and lots of character on the palate — "best with food"
ROSEMOUNT V Sparkling Chardonnay	15	13.00	Australia	12.5	220	Mid-straw colour; developed yeasty and smoked meat aromas; nutty cashew, yeast and salami flavours; complex and well-balanced palate — "would go well with food"
TULLOCH Cuvée Brut Méthode Champenoise 1998	15	18.80	Australia	12.5	220	Deeper golden colour; toasty, honey and fig aromas with a hint of herbs; earthy, herbal, licorice flavours, bit extracted — "aged but lacks life"
YELLOWGLEN Yellow	15	11.00	Australia	11.5	220, 300	Gold colour; toast and smoky caramel aromas; toasty palate, oily and dry — "quite tired and developed
WINDY PEAK Prestige	14.5	13.50	Australia	11.5	220, 300	Salmon/rose colour; red berry and Turkish delight aromas; sweet, hard and aggressive on the palate — "intense lolly-flavoured without finesse"
MIXED EMOTIONS (in alphabetical order)						
BROWN BROTHERS Pinot Noir Chardonnay King Valley	13–17	17.00	Australia	12	220	Mid-straw colour; aromas of buttery toast, lemon butter and vanilla; citrus fruit flavours, slightly bitter — "balanced, refreshing", "broad and lacking finesse"
DEAKIN ESTATE Brut	15–17.5	9.00 **(F)**	Australia	13	220, 300	Mid-straw colour; toast, yeast, strawberry and marzipan aromas; green apple and sweet and sour flavour — "good depth and acid", "too lean and green"
YELLOWGLEN Vintage 1998	15–18	20.00	Australia	11.5	220, 300	Light straw colour; lemon, toast and Vegemite aromas; nice fruit balance, fresh, zesty — "good acid but finishes hard", "elegant and fine aperitif style"
MORE THAN $20 (in rank order)						
POMMERY Champagne	18.5	53.00	France	12.5	220, 300	Mid-straw colour with golden tints; big, toasty/oatmeal nose with slight burnt nuances; malty, intense palate with complex yeast, nougat, toffee and spice characters, aperitif style — "classy, elegant, tasty"
MOET & CHANDON Brut Imperial Champagne 1995	18	100.00	France	12.5	220	Mid-straw colour; intense aromas of crusty bread, strawberry, butter, mushroom, lanolin, blue cheese; long, finely textured palate, flavours of stone fruit, yeast, citrus, nougat — "complex, intense flavour"
POL ROGER Champagne Brut	18	56.00	France	12	220	Deep straw colour; rich, toasty, white chocolate, plum pudding, wet yeast and honey aromas; complex flavours in a yeasty style, dry — "powerful, complex food wine"
POL ROGER Champagne Brut 1993	17.5	80.00	France	12	220, 300	Mid-straw colour; strong toast, marzipan, mushroom and lanolin aromas with slightly burnt notes; smoky bacon, warm toast and fragrant fruit flavours with some yeast complexity — "rich food style"
TAITTINGER Brut Reserve	17.5	60.00	France	12	220, 300	Light- to mid-straw colour; complex cheesy, lanolin, mushroom aromas; long, elegant palate with nougat, strawberry, mushroom and toast flavours — "good overall structure"
VEUVE CLICQUOT Ponsardin	17.5	70.00	France	12	220	Light- to mid-straw colour; bready, strawberry jam and lime/citrus aromas; rich, sweet, bready and strawberry jam flavours, good acid and length — "rich yet elegant"
BILLECART-SALMON Champagne	17	58.95	France	12	220	Mid-straw colour; honey, butter, toffee and lanolin/mushroom aromas; lean, fresh lemony structure, excellent aperitif style — "good fruit weight, tight acid finish"
DEUTZ Marlborough Cuvée Brut	17	22.00	NZ	12	220, 300	Pale gold colour; brioche, malt and honey aromas; toasty, complex palate with vanilla and lingering fruit flavours, finely textured — "this one stood out"
MOET & CHANDON Brut Imperial Champagne	17	66.70	France	12	220	Mid-straw colour; bready/brioche, mushroomy aromas with a mineral note; lean, tight and lemony on the palate, good length, mineral dryness — "aperitif style"
MOET & CHANDON Cuvée Dom Perignon 1993	17	224.00	France	12.5	220	Mid-straw colour; herbal, lanolin and citrus aromas; big and bold style with green apple and yeast flavours — "fine and elegant with good tightness"

Brand	1 Score	2 Target price	Origin	Alcohol (%)	3 Additives	4 Tasting notes
PER-HEIDSIECK Champagne rut	17	54.95	France	12	220, 300	Mid-straw colour; aromas of warm brioche, toast, blue cheese and strawberries; complex, fine and tight pinot fruit-driven palate with strawberry and confectionery flavours — "rich, complex, powerful"
OLLINGER Champagne Special uvée	16.5	75.30	France	12	220	Dark straw colour; aromas of wet yeast, Vegemite and lanolin; drying palate, a bit honeyed, yeasty, full-flavoured — "good acid backbone, very good texture"
AURENT-PERRIER Brut LP	16.5	74.00	France	12	220	Mid-straw colour; simple, lean, citrus, biscuity yeast and blue cheese aromas; fragrant pinot noir palate, good length, good acid finish — "simple, lean, zesty"
HANDON Brut	16	20.50	Australia	12.5	220	Bronze colour with very fine mousse and persistent bead; bready, strawberry and mushroom aromas; bold, complex palate with big toasty, marzipan and fruit flavours, well-balanced — "complex style, a tad hard"
GRANT BURGE Barossa Pinot Noir Chardonnay	16	20.00	Australia	11.5	220	Pale bronze colour; complex nose of biscuit, dough and fruit tingles; complex toast, butter and pinot fruit flavours, a bit broad — "full, firmer style"
ANSZ Australia Premium Non Vintage Cuvée	16	21.95	Australia	12	220, 300	Mid-straw colour; simple fruit, citrus and fine nougat aromas; fine and creamy palate, lingering, drying finish — "light, clean and fresh, but lacks extra depth"
YALUMBA D Cuvée 1997	16	28.30	Australia	12	220	Mid-straw colour; yeasty brioche, lanolin and sherbet/lime aromas; soft, ripe peach, melon and nougat flavours — "simple flavours"
BLUE PYRENEES Midnight Cuvée Chardonnay	15	32.00	Australia	12.5	220, 300	Pale white gold colour; green apple aromas with lifted acetic acid; tight lemon essence palate with nectarine and apple flavours — "tight palate but quite singular"
MIXED EMOTIONS (in alphabetical order)						
ARRAS Pinot Noir Chardonnay 1995	14–17	55.00	Australia	12	220, 300	Mid-straw colour; aromas of citrus fruit (grapefruit, lemons), toast and stewed quince with hints of gunpowder; big, bold, complex palate with a long finish — "acid and long", "lacks drive or finish"
BOLLINGER Grande Année 1992	15–18.5	130.00	France	12	220	Deep straw colour; aromas of marzipan, nuts, mouldy cheese, citrus and honey; rich, savoury palate of great complexity and length — "nicely balanced", "over the top"
SEPPELT SALINGER Méthode Champenoise 1994	15.5–18.5	23.00	Australia	12.5	220	Mid-straw colour; simple fruit, yeasty, mushroom/blue cheese and nut aromas; earthy, developed palate, drying finish — "mono-dimensional", "full-flavoured, astringent style"
SPARKLING REDS (in rank order)						
BANROCK STATION Sparkling Shiraz	16	11.55	Australia	14	220, 300	Rich red colour with youthful purple hues; tarry, licorice, cherry, berry and Black Forest cake aromas; intense flavours of sweet jammy fruits, a bit dry — "very fresh younger style"
COCKATOO Black Premium Sparkling Red Non Vintage	16	15.50	Australia	13.5	220	Deep red colour with amber hues; spicy, slightly leafy aromas with notes of raspberry and plum; 'Cherry Ripe' flavours, fair structure, long fruit and yeast characters — "good texture and complexity"
SIR JAMES Shiraz	16	19.85	Australia	14	220	Cherry red colour; smoky aromas of leather, chocolate and cassis; some sweet chocolate, fruity and spicy developed leather characters on the palate, full-bodied, dry finish — "pretty good"
ANDREW GARRETT Sparkling Burgundy	15.5	14.50	Australia	13	220	Brick red with a touch of tawny colour; spicy, mushroom, licorice and dusty marzipan aromas; upfront spicy flavours with coffee, tarry and jam characters — "sweeter, generously flavoured"
MORRIS Sparkling Shiraz Durif	15.5	18.30	Australia	13.5	220	Cherry red colour; berry, plum jam, leather and herbal (medicinal) aromas; dusty oak and cherry flavours, sweeter finish — "lacks softness and generosity"
RUMBALL Sparkling Shiraz Special Cuvée	15	21.80	Australia	12.5	220	Deep red colour with amber hues; peppery leather, sweet plum, marzipan and berry aromas; softer, mushroomy palate with flavours of slightly cooked fruit — "shows quite a lot of development"
TATACHILLA Sparkling Malbec Padthaway	14	17.00	Australia	14	220	Deep youthful red colour with purple hints; cherry, spice, licorice, mushroom, leather and stalky aromas; bitter on the palate, intense and quite tannic — "tough drink"

The CHOICE Wine Buying Guide 2002

BY PETER CEREXHE

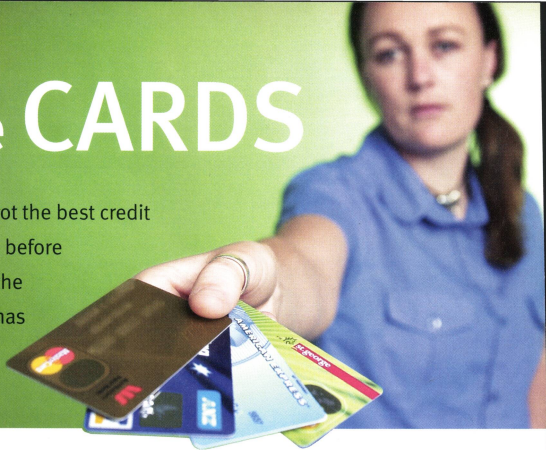
At last, the wine guide that makes the choice easy for ordinary consumers! CHOICE has picked 400 good-value wines for this unique guide. Each of the wines tested and reported on is widely available across the country, and the majority of the prices range from $5–$25. The 14 experts who assessed the wines were winemakers, retailers or consultants; the tastings were 'blind' and CHOICE bought every bottle. It'll be available in February 2002, as a 176-page large-format paperback, plus an eight-page colour insert, for just $30. Look out for it in the Jan/Feb Consumer Bookshelf.



VANESSA MARSHALL

On the CARDS

Make sure you've got the best credit card for your needs before you start 'bashing the plastic' in a Christmas shopping spree.



IN A NUTSHELL

- **Do you really** *need a credit card? We explore some alternatives.*
- **Do you want** *a card with interest-free days and a loyalty program, or should you be looking for a cheaper 'no frills' card? Choose from our Top 10 for both kinds on pages 17 and 18.*
- **See our tips** *for getting the best value out of your card on pages 17 and 18..*

Credit cards are changing. During the past four years the emphasis has been on cards that provide reward programs. Now the industry is realising that loyalty cards with high fees and interest rates aren't everyone's cup of tea. It's increasingly offering a range of credit cards, suitable for very different types of consumer. And smart credit cards are on the way, with many new options — and fees.

The type of card you choose should depend on how you plan to use it and your ability to repay.

CAN YOU LIVE WITHOUT ONE?

If you currently have an outstanding balance on your credit card, how much interest are you paying? Most standard credit cards have an interest rate between 14.5% and 17.5%. 'Reward' cards charge between 14.9% and 17.7% and retail store cards can be up around 21%. Even 'no frills' cards (with rates from 10.9% to 13.5%) may be more expensive than other types of credit. Consider the following alternatives:

- **Debit cards**. Some debit accounts (where you use the card to pay with your own money) come with a low-interest overdraft if you don't always have enough cash to cover transactions. Make sure your account doesn't have high transaction fees and stick within your fee-free transaction limits. You can still accumulate rewards on purchases using schemes like Fly Buys.
- **Personal loans**. There are many available with interest rates below 10%. It can be a much cheaper way to buy an expensive item like a major appliance.

JUST TOO CONVENIENT

The main advantage of a credit card is convenience:

- It makes it easy to pay for goods and services in retail outlets and over the phone or Internet.
- You don't need to carry large amounts of cash.
- Most cards can be used extensively around the world at ATMs and retail outlets. You can do this with some

Your choices

Earlier this year we asked a group of CHOICE subscribers to tell us about their credit card use. Thank you to the 367 respondents. Your answers have helped us to identify how credit cards are used and what consumers want from their cards.

- Only 8% of respondents said they don't have a credit card; 42% have one card, 50% more than one.
- Respondents with more than one card tend to spend more on their cards each month than those with one card. Around a third of those with more than one card spend over $2000 a month with them.
- 79% of our respondents said they had received a phone call or letter offering an increase in their credit limit or a new card in the past six months.
- Almost one third of the respondents said they find it difficult to understand the fees and charges on the credit card.
- We also asked if fees had changed in the previous six months. Although some respondents couldn't remember, over half of those who could said their fees had changed in that period.

debit cards too. Check what fees apply for using a card overseas.

- They can be safer than cash (see below).

But it makes sense to choose the most appropriate card for your needs to ensure it gives good value for money as well as convenience.

WATCH OUT FOR SPECIAL OFFERS

Some credit card providers offer cheaper 'honeymoon' interest rates for periods of six or 12 months to entice new customers. Be cautious about these offers: check what the interest rate reverts to at the end of the honeymoon period. You may find it's higher than other cards. You also need to check annual fees, interest-free periods and rewards to be sure you really are getting a good deal.

SAFER THAN CASH?

Credit cards offer a 'charge-back' system. If a company fails to supply goods or services paid for on a credit card, you can ask the bank or other organisation that provides your credit card for a refund.

Charge-back policies vary, so check with your credit card provider. And the recent collapse of Ansett Airlines demonstrated that charge-back is not guaranteed. For example, most card issuers initially adopted a 'wait and see' approach and wouldn't honour charge-back for prepaid tickets until after the date of the booked flight.

Most credit card providers also limit the cardholder's liability if the card is lost or stolen or the card details are used fraudulently. Again, policies vary from one card issuer to the next. It's worth checking it out before you sign up for a card.

IF YOU DON'T ALWAYS PAY IN FULL

If you know you'll have an outstanding balance on your credit card some or most of the time, you need a 'no frills' card with the lowest possible interest rate. Check that the annual fee is also reasonable. Interest-free periods aren't as important if you intend to pay your card off over an extended period of time, though still nice if you can get them. The **ST GEORGE Starts Low Stays Low MasterCard** with a 10.99% interest rate is an example. It still has up to 55 days interest-free, but doesn't have a loyalty scheme.

You may well have to forgo a loyalty scheme to get a cheap card. See Table 1 at the bottom of the page for our top 10 low-interest credit cards, and *Tips*, below, for more advice on choosing a card.

TIPS

If you don't pay in full each month

- Choose a card with a low interest rate.
- Avoid cash advances. If you withdraw cash from a credit card, you pay interest immediately on that amount, even if your card has an interest-free period for normal purchases.
- Pay off as much as you can each month. Always cover at least the interest and any fees.
- Avoid having more than two credit cards in order to save on annual fees and maximise any reward points. Only use one credit card to pay off another as a last resort.
- Keep your credit card limit as low as possible. Avoid accepting offers for increased limits.

MORE INFORMATION

- *Go to www.choice.com.au for more information about credit cards and other ways to borrow money. Type 'borrowing' in the search box on the home page to get our list of articles on credit cards, overdrafts, personal and home loans, and interactive tools to help you compare credit cards or overdrafts. If you're a personal subscriber to the magazine, take advantage of our free trial access to the website (see page 2).*
- *Visit the Cannex website at www.cannex.com.au and check out its credit card star ratings for comprehensive information on more than 200 credit cards.*
- *See www.cu.net.au and go to 'publications' to find a booklet called* Play your cards right *— the Credit Union Services Corporation's comprehensive guide to managing credit cards.*

IN TOO DEEP?

If you think your credit card use is out of control, take the following steps:

- ***Talk to the credit card provider. It may be able to help you with a special repayment scheme.***
- ***Try to draw up a budget that means you only spend what you can afford.***
- ***Talk to a financial counsellor, who can help you to manage your finances and get out of debt.***

Table 1: Top 10 low-interest credit cards

(in order of interest rate)

Institution	Product	Interest rate (%)	Annual fee ($)	Interest-free days*	Reward program available	States available
ST GEORGE	Starts Low Stays Low MasterCard	10.99	39	25		All except Tas, WA
ANZ	ANZ 1st (Low Interest Visa)	11.75	26	0		All
NRMA Building Society	NRMA Visa No Free Days	12.40	25	0	✓	All except WA
SUNCORP METWAY	Visa Extra	12.50	30 **(A)**	0		ACT, NSW, Qld
WESTPAC	No Annual Fee MasterCard	14.20	0	0		All
COMMONWEALTH	Visa Fee Free	14.25	0	0		All
AMERICAN EXPRESS	Gold Credit Card	14.49	70	25	✓	All
HSBC	Amex Gold Credit Card	14.49	70	25	✓	All except WA
NATIONAL AUSTRALIA	BankCard Fee Free	14.60	0	0	✓	All
BANKWEST	Visa Affinity Free Days	14.65	26	10		NSW, Qld, SA, Vic, WA

* *All cards with interest-free days offer up to 30 days plus a number of days after the statement date, which is what's shown in the table. Cards that don't have an interest-free period start calculating interest from the day you make a purchase. They're indicated by a in the table.*

(A) *$2.50 per month.*

Source: Cannex; see www.cannex.com.au.

If you're going to pay off your card over an extended period, choose one of the cards in Table 1. Most don't have an interest-free period, but they have low interest rates and reasonable annual fees.

Table 2: Top 10 credit cards with 25 or more interest-free days

(in order of annual fee, then interest rate)

Institution	Product	Annual fee ($)	Interest rate (%)	Interest-free days*	Reward program available	States available
WOOLWORTHS Ezy Banking	Woolworths Ezy MasterCard	24	15.25	25	✓	All
WESTPAC	MasterCard Free Days	24	15.65	25		All
COMMONWEALTH	MasterCard	24	15.90	25		All
AMERICAN EXPRESS	Amex Blue Credit Card	25	15.29	25	✓	All
AUSSIE HOME LOANS	Aussie Card	25	15.29	25	✓	All except NT, Tas
HSBC	Amex Interest Free	25	15.29	25	✓	All except WA
SUNCORP METWAY	Suncorp Metway Blue Amex	25	15.29	25	✓	ACT, NSW, Qld
AMP BANKING	AMP Credit Card	25	15.40	25	✓	All
ST GEORGE	Visa Free Days	30	16.25	25		All except Tas, WA
CITIBANK	Silver Visa	30	17.70	25	✓	All

* *All cards with interest-free days offer up to 30 days plus a number of days after the statement date, which is what's shown in the table.*

Source: Cannex — www.cannex.com.au.

If you intend to pay off your entire credit card balance within the interest-free period, choose one of the cards in Table 2.

FEES

In addition to the annual fee, credit cards may also charge fees for:

- *Cash advances.*
- *Not making the minimum monthly repayment.*
- *Breaching your credit limit.*
- *Late payment.*
- *Paying at Australia Post.*

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IF YOU'LL ALWAYS PAY IN FULL

You have several options if you know you can pay your whole outstanding amount in full each month.

- Have you considered a **charge card** (American Express or Diners Club)? They have a joining fee and an annual fee but don't charge interest. If you fail to pay off your account in full each month, though, high penalties (about 3% of your balance) apply. Some charge cards have the added flexibility of not imposing a limit on how much you can spend; others have higher limits than many credit cards. However, charge cards aren't as widely accepted for phone and Internet transactions as credit cards.
- If you want the flexibility of occasionally not paying off your entire balance, look for a credit card with the most interest-free days. Most of these cards have a higher annual fee and a higher interest rate, and they usually give you the option of earning reward points. See *Tips if you do pay in full every month*, below, for advice on choosing a loyalty program.
- If you intend to make a lot of high-value transactions on your credit card, it may be worth having a gold or platinum card. These are usually more expensive than standard credit cards but offer more rewards, including free international travel insurance, and have much higher credit limits.
- If you're likely to spend a large amount on your credit card each year, look for one that waives the annual fee once you've spent over a certain threshold. The lowest 'annual spend' for a fee waiver is $2400 (for the **ANZ Telstra Visa Card**), the highest $20,000 (for the **ANZ Low Interest Mastercard**).

For our top 10 credit cards with an interest-free period, see Table 2, above. ■

TIPS

If you do pay in full every month

- Go for the card with the most interest-free days. Those that offer an interest-free period give you at least a month (from one statement to the next). Our tables show how many extra days you get from the day your statement arrives until the due date. The more, the better.
- Cards with loyalty schemes work best if you use your card frequently to make large purchases but pay it off in the interest-free period. If you don't use your card this way you may be better off forgoing the rewards for a lower-interest card.
- Avoid cash advances (see *Tips*, page 17).
- Does the loyalty scheme offer the type of rewards that are likely to benefit your lifestyle?
- Get the most out of your reward points by making sure you know their lifespan so you can use them before they expire. Better still, look for a card that offers rewards with an unlimited lifespan.
- Check how many points you'll earn per dollar spent. But also check how many points you'll need before you can exchange them for goods or services.
- Are bonus points available — for example, if you shop at certain retail outlets?
- Do you have to pay loyalty points as an additional fee when you want to exchange them for flights or other rewards?
- Never spend more just to earn points, especially if you think you'll end up paying interest.

VIDEO TAPES

Want a good, cheap video tape for everyday use?

VANESSA MARSHALL

On test were 17 widely available 180-minute (three-hour) VHS video cassette tapes, and four 300-minute (five-hour) tapes. For each brand we chose the cheapest variant suitable for everyday use (typically 'standard quality', as opposed to the higher-quality, more expensive versions).

Best overall were the **TEAC X-2 VHS E-180, ACME E-180 High Grade, JVC E-180SX** and **AKAI HQ E-180**, all of which scored well for picture quality. The **TEAC X-2** also stood out in the long-term performance tests, well ahead of the other three and of the next best long-term performer, the **YAMANA SG E-180**.

Some of the five-hour tapes performed quite well in the first round of tests, although not as well as the better three-hour tapes. The tape in E-300s is much thinner than standard E-180 tape, and more likely to suffer from problems in the long term — as our testing showed. However, the best of them — the **EXCEL Gold E-300 SGX Super Grade** — scored better than its three-hour equivalent.

There's quite a difference between the best and the worst performers in our test, but whether or not you'd notice the difference could depend on your video player and your TV: a good VCR can use digital technology to disguise some defects in tapes, while a bad TV won't show off the superior performance of good tapes. And, of course, it depends on the quality of the signal you recorded (TV program or copied video, say).

Any of the top tapes would be fine for everyday use. If you want to store something important, like a wedding or family gathering, use a good-quality or professional tape and store it in cool and dry conditions.

For more on the picture quality and long-term performance tests, see notes 2 and 3, page 21.

DIFFERENCES WITHIN A BRAND

Many brands are no more than that — just a brand name on a product manufactured and assembled in any of a number of factories. This can mean some products have the same manufacturer but different brands; and some products carry the same brand but have various manufacturers.

From a consumer's point of view, if tapes of the same brand are made by different manufacturers, there may well be differences within the brand, so you can't be sure you're getting a consistent product.

As an example, the three tapes tested from one

WHAT TO BUY

E-180 (three-hour)	
TEAC X-2 VHS E-180	$3.95
ACME E-180 High Grade	$2.79
JVC E-180SX	$2.87
AKAI HQ E-180	$2.99
E-300 (five-hour)	
EXCEL Gold E-300 SGX Super Grade	$5.99 – $7.99
YAMANA SG Super Grade E-300	$5.99 – $7.99

Prices are recommended retail; see overleaf for photos.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **We tested video tapes** *for initial picture quality and again for quality after an aging process: the* ***TEAC X-2 E-180*** *performed well for both.*
- **Video tapes are** *quite sensitive to environmental conditions, and their quality can be affected after leaving the factory by heat, humidity and other factors — which may contribute to performance differences we found within brands.*
- **You can't tell** *a tape's quality by the claims on its packaging — see* What's in a name?, *page 20.*

particular brand were all quite different. One was made in US and assembled in Korea, while the other two were made and assembled in China. However, the two most similar in performance were the US/Korean tape and one of the Chinese tapes — the other Chinese tape didn't score as well for picture quality. Similar variation was found among some other brands. As a brand has to be judged by its poor quality as well as its good, we averaged the three scores, but this variation within some brands means you can't rely on consistent quality.

With good quality control procedures in place, all products bearing the same brand should be consistent no matter where each was made — at least when they leave the factory. After that, transport, storage conditions and age can all affect the quality of the tapes, and manufacturers have no control over that.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The tape's grading shown on its packaging is related more to pricing structure within the brand than to any technical considerations, and one brand's 'high grade' may be exactly the same as another's 'standard grade'. Also, it's common in the leading factories to have an oversupply of better tapes that get sent on to lower-level markets, meaning even though you buy 'standard quality' you may sometimes end up getting 'high quality'.

In our test, only the **BASF**, **JVC**, and **PALSONIC** tapes are labelled 'standard quality' (SQ). Most of the others are called HQ (high quality), SGX (super grade), HG (high grade) and other such terms that give the impression of being the next step up from 'standard grade', even though there isn't a cheaper 'standard grade' in that brand's product range.

Some of the graphs of performance on the packaging give the appearance of being technically accurate, but don't include sufficient information, such as calibrated units or a reference scale, to indicate anything meaningful. Essentially, when you're buying video tape you're in the dark, so go for our recommendations. ■

Looking after your tapes

Video tape is made from a polyester film and coated with magnetic material and a binder. How long it lasts — and how well — depends not only on initial quality, but how it's looked after. ScreenSound Australia offers the following tips for care of your tapes and VCR.

- Don't store tapes in a hot or humid location, such as in an attic, on a concrete floor, near a bathroom or laundry or in a closed cabinet containing your VCR.
- Keep them in their covers for protection.
- Store them vertically — if several tapes are stacked horizontally, the plastic casing may warp and the edge of the tape inside may get squashed, affecting the smooth running of the tape through the heads.
- Magnetic interference from fridge magnets, small headphones and speaker cabinets can damage tapes.
- If you're storing a video long-term, play it once a year or so to check quality and prevent sticking — tape can develop tight or loose packing, which can stretch or distort it.
- Playing tapes frequently can damage them, so keep a back-up copy of those you watch often.
- If a tape has started to deteriorate, stop using it. It may damage the video heads, which in turn can damage other tapes.

For more information and tips see ScreenSound's website: www.screensound.gov.au (go to 'Our expertise').

PROFILES: VANESSA MARSHALL

Brand / model	PERFORMANCE					SPECIFICATIONS	
	1 Overall score (%)	2 Picture quality score (%)	3 Long-term score (%)	Initial dropout rate (no. / minute)	Long-term dropout rate (no. / minute)	Origin	Price ($)*
180-minute (3-hour) tapes							
TEAC X-2 VHS E-180	71	70	73	3	6	Korea / China **(C)**	3.95
ACME E 180 High Grade	68	74	53	3	31	China	2.79
JVC E-180SX	65	70	52	2	32	China	2.87
AKAI HQ E-180	63	70	47	4	44	Korea	2.99
HANIMEX E-180 High Grade	60	66	45	5	55	Korea / China	3.99
TDK SC-180	59	64	48	4	43	Japan / Thailand **(D)**	2.95
YAMANA SG Super Grade E-180	59	60	55	7	30	Korea / Australia **(E)**	3.05 **(H)**
PALSONIC E180 VHS	58	68	35	2	90	China	2.99
BASF EQ-180 **(A)**	55	67	26	3	>100	Germany	5.95
BASF SQ E-180	55	68	26	3	>100	Germany	4.95
TEAC ASX E-180	55	60	42	8	63	Korea / China **(C)**	3.95
SONY Super DX-E180	53	60	35	7	88	Korea	4.95
PANASONIC NV-E180PRA Premium	52	56	42	6	68	Japan **(F)**	3.25
FUJI AG E-180 PAL/Secam	51	60	29	4	>100	China	4.99
PHILIPS HG-180 **(B)**	48	54	33	15	83	China	4.95
EXCEL Gold E-180 SGX Super Grade	45	52	29	9	>100	Korea / Australia **(E)**	3.05
MAXELL E-180GX Power Tape	42	46	34	33	96	Japan / China **(G)**	3.99
300-minute (5-hour) tapes							
EXCEL Gold E-300 SGX Super Grade	55	66	30	5	>100	Korea / Australia **(E)**	5.99 **(J)**
YAMANA SG Super Grade E-300	52	60	34	4	80	Korea / Australia **(E)**	5.99 **(J)**
BASF EQ-300	45	58	16	9	>100	Germany	8.95
TDK E-300HSEN	35	42	19	50	>100	Luxemburg	7.95

* *Prices are recommended retail, as provided by manufacturers in September 2001.*

(A) *Only one sample tested to compare to five-hour equivalent.*

(B) *Discontinued, but may still be available in shops.*

(C) *Tape made in Korea, assembled in China.*

(D) *Tape made in Japan, assembled in Thailand.*

(E) *Tape made in Korea, assembled in Australia.*

(F) *Now made in Korea.*

(G) *Made in China from Japanese components.*

(H) *The manufacturer gives the recommended retail price as $3.05–$3.20.*

(J) *The manufacturer gives the recommended retail price as $5.99–$7.99.*

1 Overall score

The overall score is made up as follows:

- Picture quality: 70%
- Long-term performance: 30%

2 Picture quality

Prior to testing, the tapes were preconditioned for 24 hours at 23°C and 45% humidity. The tape was rewound to even out stresses that may have occurred during shipping and storage.

The tape was recorded on once only and then replayed, so the results here don't necessarily reflect typical circumstances, where a tape is over-recorded and played several times. However, if the initial quality isn't good, it's unlikely to get better with use.

We tested samples from more than one batch number for each brand. The score shown in the table is the averaged result for the brand.

Picture quality takes into account the following measures:

- Dropout is when there's a momentary loss of signal (picture). On new tapes this is due to contamination or missing magnetic material (the coating may not be even or complete). The annoyance caused by dropouts depends on how long and how frequent they are. More than 100 detectable dropouts per minute would be practically unwatchable.
- We recorded a range of frequencies and measured the strength and uniformity of the video signal.
- Signal to noise ratio is an indication of how much the maximum output signal exceeds the background 'noise'. It's a measure of how much graininess, random specks or shifts in colour will appear in the picture.
- Frequency response tests indicate how well tapes record colour and details, such as a finely divided black and white pattern.

Dropout contributed 40% to the picture quality score, and radio frequency, signal to noise ratio and frequency response 20% each.

3 Long-term score

Tapes were artificially aged to simulate five to 10 years of storage in a hot, humid climate, and underwent the same picture quality tests as at the initial stage. Signal to noise ratio and frequency response aren't affected over time to the same extent as dropout and radio frequency, so we only scored the latter two aspects.

The scores for this test weren't weighted as heavily as initial picture quality in the overall results because:

- The test was harsh, replicating use in a tropical or sub-tropical climate.
- Most people wouldn't use standard-quality tapes for recording something they want to keep long-term.
- Tests simulating only two to five years' storage showed very little difference from the initial results.

The score for long-term performance was made up as follows:

- Dropout rate after aging: 60%.
- Radio frequency after aging: 40%.

VANESSA MARSHALL

SUMMERT

Try our quiz to test your food safety knowledge — and don't worry: if you have a few blank spots, the answers are there as well.

It's summertime and the Christmas holiday period isn't far off. A great time of year, but also great for the bacteria that cause food poisoning. People get ill from food all year round, but summer is when it happens most often. Bacteria just love the warmth (see *The basics of bugs*, page 24), and we reward them with ample opportunities. Just think about it:

- We take food out of the fridge and keep it in a hot car and on a hot beach for hours.
- We eat barbecued snags that are burnt on the outside and raw in the middle; the chicken's still pink around the bone.
- We spread the table with salads, cold meats, creamy dips and dressings and invite people to pick away through the evening.

About 20% of all food poisoning occurs from food cooked and eaten at home. Some of the things you need to do to keep food safe are very widely known — others might surprise you. Try our quiz. The answers are on pages 24 to 25.

IN A NUTSHELL

There are three golden rules for avoiding food poisoning:

- **Avoid the temperature danger zone.** *Bacteria thrive at temperatures between 4°C and 60°C. In ideal conditions, one bacterium can multiply to more than two million within seven hours. So store perishable food below 4°C and if you're buying hot takeaway, make sure it's been kept above 60°C.*
- **Avoid cross-contamination.** *At home, the most likely sources of harmful bacteria are raw meat and unwashed fruit and vegetables. Don't let raw meat or juices come into contact with food that's going to be eaten uncooked, or defrosting meat drip onto other food in the fridge. Always wash your hands before starting to prepare food — and wash them again after handling raw meat.*
- **When in doubt, toss it out.** *Most food-poisoning bacteria and their toxins have no taste or smell. The smell of putrefaction is usually due to relatively harmless bacteria called pseudomonas. So it needn't be obvious that food's contaminated.*

1 **Food poisoning you get at home is usually mild and not dangerous.**

A. True.
B. False.

2 **You've found some leftovers in the fridge that have been there for a week. They smell OK. Should you:**

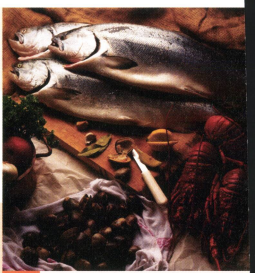
A. Eat them?
B. Throw them away?
C. Feed them to the dog?

3 **Before preparing food do you usually:**

A. Give your hands a wipe on the tea towel?
B. Wash your hands for 10 seconds with soap and warm water, but don't dry them?
C. Wash your hands in just water for 10 seconds, then dry them well on a towel?
D. Wash your hands for 10 seconds with soap and warm water, and dry them well?
E. Forget to wash your hands?

4 **If you wash meat or poultry under running water before you cook it you'll wash away most of the bacteria.**

A. True.
B. False.



5 **You've just used the chopping board for raw meat. Before chopping salad or raw vegetables, would you usually:**

A. Wipe it with the dishcloth?
B. Rinse it under the tap?
C. Turn it over and use the other side?
D. Scrub it with hot water and detergent?
E. Spray it with antibacterial cleaner, then wipe it clean?
F. Do nothing — just reuse it as it is?
G. Use another board?

ME
— and the bugs are breeding

6 **When making a salad, do you:**
A. Wash all the ingredients that have dirt on them?
B. Wash the lettuce but nothing else?
C. Wash all the vegetables all the time?
D. Wash nothing?

7 **When defrosting a chook, would you:**
A. Leave it on the bench in its plastic bag or covered with a tea towel?
B. Defrost it in a watertight container in the fridge?
C. Use the microwave?
D. Cook it from frozen?

8 **Which of these meats are safe to eat when rare or pink inside?**
A. Mince and sausages.
B. Chicken and turkey.
C. Pork.
D. Rolled roast.
E. Leg of lamb.
F. Steak.
G. Chicken livers.

9 **The temperature of your fridge is:**
A. Between 0°C and 4°C .
B. Between 5°C and 8°C.
C. A complete mystery.

10 **Freezing kills bacteria in food.**
A. True.
B. False

11 **What's the best way to store leftovers?**
A. Leave them in the dish in the oven till the next day.
B. Put them into the fridge as soon as the meal is served.
C. Leave them on the bench for a short time to cool and then put them in the fridge.
D. Keep them covered on the bench till the next day.

12 **When reheating or cooking food in the microwave, do you:**
A. Follow the times suggested on the pack or in the microwave instructions book, and then serve immediately?
B. Stop the microwave several times during cooking to stir the food, and allow it to stand before serving?
C. Microwave till bubbling and steaming?

13 **You're having a party and there's not enough room in the fridge for all the food. Which foods would you leave out?**
A. The beer.
B. Salad.
C. Cheese dips.
D. Cooked meat.
E. Fruit platter.
F. Sandwiches.

14 **How do you clean your dishcloth?**
A. Rinse it under the tap.
B. Give it a quick sniff and wash it when it starts to pong.
C. Soak it in bleach every two or three days.
D. Microwave it for a minute every day.
E. Wash it in hot water and detergent every few days.

Answers

1 The correct answer is **B**. There's no reason to assume food poisoning you might get at home is any less dangerous than from eating out; the bacteria that cause illness are the same. You might just get a dose of vomiting and diarrhoea, but sometimes the consequences can be much more serious. Babies and children, the elderly, pregnant women, people with weak immune systems and those suffering from a chronic illness are most at risk. But a campylobacter infection can leave even a normal healthy adult very unwell for several weeks.

2 The best answer is **B**. The bugs that cause food to smell off aren't the same ones that cause food poisoning. In fact, most pathogenic (disease-causing) bacteria leave food looking, smelling and tasting perfectly fine. Play safe — when in doubt, toss it out.

If you chose **C**, your pet is at risk too. Any animal that eats food that's been contaminated by bacteria is susceptible to poisoning. Your dog is probably more resistant to infection than you are, but can still be affected by the toxins produced by the bacteria. These can cause severe gastrointestinal upset. Severely affected animals can go into shock and even die.

3 **D** is the best answer. Hands should be washed before preparing food. Soap removes transient bacteria, which are usually the pathogenic ones. Ordinary soap is fine; despite the hype, there's no advantage in using antibacterial products. Drying hands properly has been shown to reduce the transfer of bugs from hands to food and utensils. Hands that have been washed but not dried can sometimes spread bacteria more effectively than those that haven't been washed at all. But the towel must be clean, which means frequently used hand towels in the kitchen and bathroom should be changed daily. If a clean towel isn't available, use a paper one.

4 The correct answer is **B**. Some bacteria may be washed off, but this isn't a reliable method of making meat safe to eat. You have to cook it thoroughly to kill bacteria.

5 The best answers are **C** and **G**. The big risk here is cross-contamination: if you don't thoroughly clean or change chopping boards (and also knives and other utensils) between uses, bacteria can be transferred from raw meat to other foods. Hot water and detergent will remove most bacteria, but it's best to leave the board to dry before using it again, which should reduce the number of leftover bacteria. A quick wash under the tap or a wipe with a cloth isn't enough.

Most antibacterial cleaners need time to kill bacteria, so a quick wipe with one is likely to be less effective than a good wash with detergent and water. For a more vigorous than usual clean, soak the board in a weak solution of bleach at regular intervals. Even better, have one chopping board for raw meat and one for foods you won't be cooking (such as salads).

6 The best answer is **C**. Soil can contain pathogenic bacteria, so if you're not cooking the food, washing it is your only line of defence. A quick dunk in the sink isn't really enough; a final rinse in running water is essential.

7 **B** and **C** are both OK. With food thawed on the bench, the outside portion can reach room temperature long before the inside has thawed. This means bacteria can start to grow, and there's likely to be enough time for them to multiply sufficiently to cause illness. Microwave defrosting is the quick option, but don't then leave the food sitting around at room temperature — cook it straightaway. Cooking food while it's frozen may mean the middle will never reach a temperature high enough to kill bacteria. This is especially a problem with chooks with a central cavity and possible contamination during processing — almost guaranteeing a bout of food poisoning.

8 **E** and **F**. Steak and a solid roast are the only meats you can eat pink or rare. This is because any bugs are mostly on the outside of the meat and they'll be killed by the heat in the pan or oven. However, with any meat that's been mixed or rolled up (such as sausages and mince, including hamburgers, and rolled roasts), the bacteria will have had ample opportunity to get into the middle. If the meat isn't cooked through, the bacteria will survive.

Poultry commonly carry campylobacter and salmonella in their gut, which can contaminate the carcass during processing; don't eat any part of a chicken or turkey pink. Stuffing makes it harder for the middle to get hot enough to kill the bacteria, and also increases the chance of introducing new contamination in the stuffing.

Pork can contain parasites and bacteria that are only killed by thorough cooking. Cook mince, hamburgers, chicken, pork and rolled meats until the juices run clear and the flesh is no longer pink.

9 It should be **A**. At less than 4°C, bacterial growth won't be stopped completely, but for most bacteria it'll be very slow. An exception is *Listeria monocytogenes*, which unfortunately grows quite well at low temperatures — even below 4°C. The most likely sources of listeria infection are soft-ripened cheeses, such as brie and camembert, soft-serve ice cream, raw vegetables, poultry, raw meat, and raw and smoked fish.

How do you know the temperature of your fridge? A fridge thermometer is a good investment; see CHOICE, November 2001, for some test results and advice on getting your fridge temperature right.

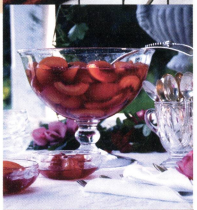
10 **B.** Freezing stops bacteria from growing but generally doesn't kill them. As the food thaws, the bacteria start to multiply again. Leftovers should only be frozen and reheated once, and thawed meats shouldn't be refrozen unless you cook them first. This is because, during cooling and thawing, foods can be at a temperature ideal for bacteria to multiply. If you do these things several times to the same food, it's likely to have been too warm for too long to be safe.

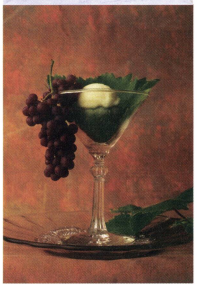
11 The correct answer is **C.** The warm temperatures in the oven are perfect for bacterial growth, and hot foods shouldn't go straight into the fridge because they'll raise the temperature and add to the risk of other foods deteriorating. Leaving food out overnight makes it likely to reach temperatures where bacteria can multiply.

12 **B** is the correct answer. Microwaves tend to heat food unevenly, so stirring while cooking is always desirable. Standing times are important as they allow the heat to distribute right through the food without overcooking it. Don't rely on bubbling — it may only mean that part of the food is hot enough to kill bacteria.

13 **A** and **E.** The beer? Too right! Warm beer won't make you sick. But if you can't stomach the thought anyway, buy some ice and put it in the bath. Warm fruit won't hurt you either. All the other foods need to be kept cool, especially if they contain meat, fish, chicken or creamy ingredients or fillings. If you're short of room even with the beer gone, use a cooler with plenty of ice or freezer packs.

14 **C, D** and **E** are all correct answers. Clean the dishcloth well and regularly to avoid spreading bacteria. Rinse off any food residue and hang it to dry after every use. If you're microwaving it, remember to dampen it first. Keep the dishcloth for 'clean' jobs: use paper towels to mop up meat juices, soil from vegetables or other 'dirty' spills.





The basics of bugs

What are we talking about? We've used the term 'bacteria' here to refer to the micro-organisms that grow on food and can infect anyone who eats it. Strictly speaking, these harmful bacteria are known as 'pathogens'. Many other bacteria are harmless. In Australia, the bugs that commonly cause problems are:

- **Salmonella:** Just one drop of contaminated chicken juice can make you very sick. It usually strikes within 12-24 hours of eating contaminated food. You're likely to feel really awful for a couple of days, and may not fully recover for weeks.
- ***Clostridium perfringens:*** Likely sources in the home are meat, poultry dishes, casseroles and the like that are cooled slowly and inadequately refrigerated. It can cause intense abdominal cramps and diarrhoea that begin 8-22 hours after eating the contaminated food. The illness is usually over within 24 hours.
- ***Vibrio parahaemolyticus:*** It's often caught from seafood from warm coastal waters. Oysters and other seafood eaten raw are a likely source. The illness is usually mild or moderate and lasts about two to three days.
- ***Staphylococcus aureus*** from the human body can grow and produce its toxin in foods like homemade pasta and fermented sausage — typically foods that get a lot of handling during preparation. Wash your hands!
- **Campylobacter**: You usually get it by eating contaminated poultry that's not adequately cooked, or by cross-contamination. It can strike up to 10 days after you've eaten the contaminated food, with similar symptoms to salmonella. The effects will last for several miserable days.
- ***Bacillus cereus*** can be a problem in cereal-based products, mashed potato, vegetables, minced meat, liver sausage and soups, and it's often associated with fried or boiled rice. It produces nausea and vomiting and, occasionally, abdominal cramps and/or diarrhoea as well.
- ***Escherichia coli (E. coli)*** don't often cause illness, but the bugs are very common. They always exist in the guts of animals, including humans. Most *E. coli* are harmless and normally serve a useful function in the body by suppressing the growth of harmful bacteria and by producing appreciable amounts of vitamins. But the presence of *E. coli* in food is an indication of both faecal contamination and the possibility of the presence of far worse bacteria that could cause serious illness.

Unfortunately not all *E. coli* are harmless. The strain *E. coli 0157* is particularly dangerous for two reasons. Doses of just a few cells (possibly as few as 10) can result in illness, and the toxin it produces is extremely potent, causing anything from mild diarrhoea to serious urinary and gastrointestinal complications, including internal bleeding. As with other strains of *E. coli*, *E. coli 0157* is normally found in cows' and other animals' guts and gets into meat in the abattoir. It's a relatively new type of infection, first recognized in Canada in 1985.

Say it with FLOWERS ...

... but, given some of the delivery mishaps and bouquet disappointments we experienced, say it some other way too.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **On test: 10 flower delivery services** *(including online ones). We gave each company the same instructions but the bouquets we got differed widely, so be specific if you've something in mind.*
- **Half the deliveries** *arrived at the wrong time, one on the wrong day and one at the wrong place (see* Problems, *below, for details).*

HOMEMADE FLOWER FOOD

You can use the following recipe if your bouquet doesn't come with cut-flower food:

- ***Add half a teaspoon of sugar, a small pinch of citric acid (or a teaspoon of vinegar or lemon juice) and a not-quite-full teaspoon of bleach to a litre of lukewarm water.***

The bleach inhibits bacterial growth, which the sugar encourages.

Whether a bouquet's ordered for a birthday, Christmas greeting, Valentine's day gift or simply to say sorry, you'd expect something fresh and pretty to arrive. How do you ensure the receiver doesn't get a crushed mess?

To find out just what you're likely to get when you order flowers, we tried out relay companies (including online florists) and local florists.

We haven't ranked the bouquets, as we only ordered one per company, which isn't enough to pass a universal judgment on the company. But they do illustrate variations you can expect in quality, value and customer service; see *How to get the best bouquet*, page 28, for our advice.

WAYS TO SEND FLOWERS

Many florists belong to **relay companies**, where you phone a central sales department, use the Internet or order through a member florist. Details of your order are then passed to a member florist close to the address of your recipient, who chooses the flowers and makes up a bouquet, then forwards it by courier.

Alternatively you can use a **local florist** — find one in the *Yellow Pages* in the area where the recipient lives (or www.yellowpages.com.au). You can then phone your order direct.

THE BEST BLOOMS

We phoned relay companies' central sales departments, ordered from online websites or phoned local florists directly, and from each ordered a bouquet worth around $50 to be delivered to one of two homes in Sydney before noon on a certain day; it was to contain at least one purple flower and three different flower varieties. Thanks to Kathy Isherwood, Head Teacher of Floristry at Ultimo (Sydney) TAFE, for judging the bouquets on the afternoon of delivery.

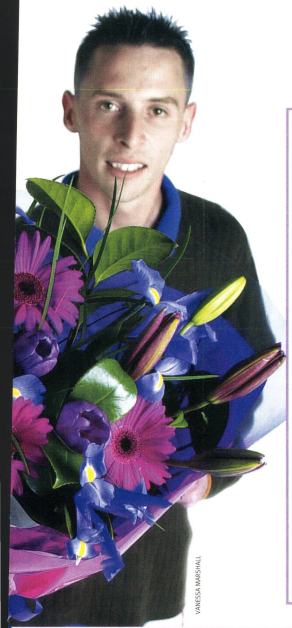
Generally, the bouquets were made to our specifications and gave at least fair value for money, although there were differences in the degree of creativity and/or care used, the use of appropriate wrapping and ribbons, and the style of bouquet created. (See *The flowers* on page 28 for expert opinion on their presentation and value.)

If you've got an idea of what you want, be as specific as you can. Online or local florists are often good choices for buying specific bouquets, as you can see more or less what you'll be getting before you order it.

With relay companies, it seems possible it's worth paying extra for delivery as, perhaps coincidentally, the two $50 bouquets which included delivery charges in that price were judged as relatively poor.

PROBLEMS

GLOBAL FLOWER SERVICES (TELEFLORA) and **INTERFLORA** misspelt the receiver's surname on the card and **FLOWERS ON THE NET** the first name, showing you really need to double or triple-check spellings with phone operators. At least the message was correct in every case.



VANESSA MARSHALL

Imported blooms

Australia imported $9.3 million worth of fresh and dried cut flowers last year. Of these, $2.4 million worth were fresh orchids, mainly from Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. Most other flowers came from South Africa, Zimbabwe, India and Mauritius, but we import from many countries, including Columbia, Ecuador, New Zealand, the Netherlands and the US.

While cut flowers are subject to strict quarantine procedures for pests and diseases, Australia currently has no ethical trading scheme, such as operates within some European countries, including Germany.

There, 'fair trade' flowers are labelled "from humane and environmentally friendly production", and must have proven compliance with production criteria such as the payment of sufficient wages, no child labour, equal treatment for all workers, avoidance of particularly poisonous pesticides and the reduction of harmful substances.

This allows German consumers to contribute to an improvement in working conditions for producer countries, and to ecologically sustainable production. We'd like to see Australian flower importers operate a similar scheme.

CARING FOR YOUR FLOWERS

These tips should keep your flowers looking fresh for as long as possible.

- *Cut an inch or so diagonally off the end of the stems before putting the flowers in water.*
- *Add cut-flower food to the water (see* Homemade flower food, *far left).*
- *Strip off leaves that will be below the water level in the vase, otherwise the water will discolour and the flowers won't last so well.*
- *Put the flowers in a cool place, out of direct sun and draughts, and not above a heat source.*
- *Top up the water in the vase regularly, and add more cut-flower food if possible. Change the water completely after five or six days.*
- *As blooms start to die, remove them — they give off gases that cause the other flowers to die more quickly. Fruit may have a similar effect, so it's best to keep your flowers away from the fruit bowl.*

Cause for complaint?

There's a lot of scope for things to go wrong with a perishable product that's meant to arrive at a specified time. Make sure you're as specific as possible when ordering and write down what's agreed. If you (or the recipient) are unhappy with the flowers, take a photo as evidence, keep a record of what happened, and give feedback quickly. It's worth complaining as you may get another bouquet sent in compensation.

The following are reasons to complain.

The bouquet's late.

If you asked for the flowers to arrive before, say, noon on Friday, and the company agreed, the time becomes part of its contract with you. Try to get this in writing if it's important. If the company says it will deliver in the morning "if possible" and you accept this, you've no grounds for complaint if it doesn't arrive on time.

The flowers arrive half-dead.

It's an implicit part of the contract that the company will provide fresh flowers of reasonable quality. But if the recipient is out when they're delivered and the flowers are left on a doorstep, the company might say it wasn't their fault if they were wilting. If it wasn't a particularly hot day, you could try arguing that the flowers should have been fresh and well packed enough to last a few hours without starting to die.

The flowers aren't what you ordered.

The bouquet sent could differ from one you chose from a picture, but check the site's small print. The company may promise to send something similar, allowing for seasonal variation. Again, try to get it in writing if it's important you get something specific.

The bouquet seems poor value for money.

There are no set rules about what constitutes value for money. If you get fewer stems than promised, you should have a case. But if the bouquet simply looks smaller than one you chose from a picture, there's little you can do — a clever photograph can make a surprisingly small posy look big.

Most importantly, however, half of the companies didn't deliver at the requested time (or even place, in one case):

- The bouquet from **GLOBAL FLOWER SERVICES (TELEFLORA)** arrived two days early. This is really unacceptable when, presumably, you're sending the bouquet for a special occasion.
- **INTERFLORA's** arrived five-and-a-half hours late — quite possibly too late for its intended purpose, and too late for our expert to be available to judge it.
- **FLOWERSHOP's** came three hours late.
- **EASYFLOWERS'** bouquet came 20 minutes late, so also just fell short of making our specified morning delivery.
- One of the local florists' bouquets turned up at the wrong address. Fortunately someone at the company phoned us to say they'd left it "out the front", and when we worked out where it was we were able to retrieve it — but that's hardly practical if the sender is a long way from the recipient. And a phone call telling them where to find it would certainly ruin the surprise.

STAYING POWER

Only **FLOREE INTERNATIONAL** included a sachet of cut-flower food with its bouquet. While **INTERFLORA** included care instructions, it omitted the recommended cut-flower food. **FLOWERSHOP** had instructions, but unfortunately they weren't relevant to this bouquet.

We kept the bouquets until most of the flowers died, which was around seven days, although **GLOBAL FLOWER SERVICES (TELEFLORA)'s** only lasted four — which meant just two after the day we specified, since they came early. ■

www.charityflowers.com

If you order INTERFLORA *flowers through* CHARITY FLOWERS *(online or by phone on 1300 88 33 55), you can assist the less fortunate while you're giving a gift.*

The bouquets don't cost any more and a percentage of every order helps Wesley Mission to prevent youth suicide, assist women in crisis, people with disabilities, the elderly and homeless people, and provide other services (go to: www.wesleymission.org.au for information).

How to get the best bouquet

Even if you don't get to see the flowers you're ordering, there are some things you can do to ensure they're at least close to your expectations, and fresh.

- If possible, order through a florist close to your recipient's address, so money can be spent on flowers rather than administration and delivery costs.
- Ask the salesperson what's seasonal and in good condition. Or tell them the flowers you want and ask whether they're currently a good choice; if they're not helpful, try another company.
- If you order from a website, remember that the picture may be a guide rather than the exact bouquet you'll be sending, so again check whether it's a good choice at that time of year.
- Consider sticking to a few robust varieties of flowers that can be relied on all year round, such as carnations and chrysanthemums.

THE FLOWERS

The companies are listed alphabetically within the two groups (we haven't named the local florists as they're only an indicative sample). Prices are those paid for the flowers/delivery in September 2001.

Our expert judged the bouquets on the following criteria, giving a score out of 10 for both:

- Presentation — attractiveness, neatness, use of creativity and condition of the flowers.
- Value for money — flower type, number of stems, bouquet size and overall impression.

LOCAL FLORISTS

LOCAL FLORIST 1

Cost: $50 / $6
Presentation score: 9
Value score: 8
Delivery: Very unsatisfactory (it was delivered to the wrong house, but we were phoned and told it was "out the front" — we tracked it down across the street).
Tulips, ranunculus, sweet peas plus magnolia foliage. It lasted seven days.

EXPERT'S COMMENTS

"Well presented and beautiful choice of flowers and wrapping."
"Very fresh ... long-lasting foliage."

LOCAL FLORIST 2

Cost: $50 / inclusive
Presentation score: 6
Value score: 5
Delivery: On time.
Gerberas, roses, irises, plus spear grass, umbrella fern and eucalyptus. Lasted seven days.

EXPERT'S COMMENTS

"Yellow ribbon and purple wrapping paper reduce overall appearance."
"Good-quality blooms apart from blemishes on roses."

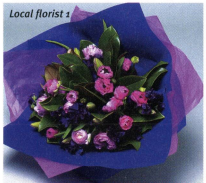
LOCAL FLORIST 3

Cost: $50 / $5.50
Presentation score: 8
Value score: 8
Delivery: On time.
Gerberas, irises, liliums plus eucalyptus foliage. It lasted seven days.

EXPERT'S COMMENTS

"Bright and cheerful, good visual effect."
"[Flowers are in] excellent condition."

PROFILES: VANESSA MARSHALL


Local florist 1

Local florist 2

easyflowers

Floree International

Flowershop

Flowers on the Net

RELAY COMPANIES (INCLUDING ONLINE FLORISTS)

EASYFLOWERS

(Ordered online: www.easyflowers.com.au)
Cost: $55 / $9.95
Presentation score: 9
Value score: 9
Delivery: Unsatisfactory: 20 minutes late.
Gerberas, liliums, irises and chrysanthemums — similar to the picture on the website, but appeared to have more flowers and variety, so you wouldn't be disappointed. It lasted nine days.

EXPERT COMMENTS

"A visually pleasing design with good-quality flowers."
"Very creative without being extreme."

FLOREE INTERNATIONAL

Cost: $50 / inclusive
Presentation score: 3
Value score: 4
Delivery: On time.
Liliums, irises, asters, fairy statice plus emu grass. Included a sachet of cut-flower food and lasted eight days.

EXPERT COMMENTS

"Quality/condition not too bad, but reflect an untidy approach to preparation."
"Good value in terms of flower selection and quantity, but untidiness detracted from this."

FLOWERSHOP

(Ordered online: www.flowershop.com.au)
Cost: $49.95 / $8.80
Presentation score: 6
Value score: 3
Delivery: Unsatisfactory: three hours late.
Liliums, gerberas, dendrobium orchids plus rhaphis palm and camellia foliage — similar to the website example, but the wrapping was differently coloured, tighter and had different ribbon. The flowers lasted nine days. While instructions for care were included they weren't relevant.

EXPERT COMMENTS

"A basic presentation with minimal use of foliage."
"A reasonable number of flower stems...but not displayed very well. Bouquet a small size for the number of blooms used."

FLOWERS ON THE NET

(Ordered online: www.floristsaustralia.com.au)
Cost: $60 / inclusive
Presentation score: 7
Value score: 6
Delivery: On time.
Roses, liliums, gerberas, sim carnations, cinerarias, irises, baby's breath plus eucalyptus foliage. It lasted seven days. Different colours and flowers were used from the website example, but it was similar enough not to disappoint. The first name of the recipient was misspelt on the card (although the confirming email was correct).

EXPERT COMMENTS

"An even, neat presentation but with dominant/bright paper/ ribbon."
"A reasonable-size bouquet ..."

GLOBAL FLOWER SERVICES (TELEFLORA)

Cost: $50 / inclusive
Presentation score: 2
Value score: 3
Delivery: Very unsatisfactory: it arrived two days too early.
Gerberas, liliums, chrysanthemums, sim carnations and alstroemeria. It lasted only four days — which meant two after the day it was supposed to arrive. Being left on the doorstep may have contributed to this. The surname of the recipient was misspelt on the card.

EXPERT COMMENTS

"All flowers browning, dead/dying."
"Very basic presentation of both flowers and wrapping."

INTERFLORA

Cost: $50 / $10
Presentation score: Not assessed.
Value score: Not assessed.
Delivery: Very unsatisfactory: the bouquet came five-and-a-half hours late and was left on the doorstep; it was too late to be judged by our expert.

The flowers lasted seven days. The surname of the recipient was misspelt, and while instructions for care with Interflora cut-flower food were included, no food was.

PETALS NETWORK

Cost: $50 / $10
Presentation score: 6
Value score: 6
Delivery: On time.
Liliums, freesias, fairy statice, gerberas, irises plus camellia foliage. It lasted seven days.

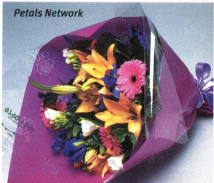
EXPERT COMMENTS

"Bouquet is large but visually the flowers are overwhelmed by the wrapping."
"Good selection of flowers but a few are damaged. Some quality blooms combined with those of lesser quality."

Local florist 3

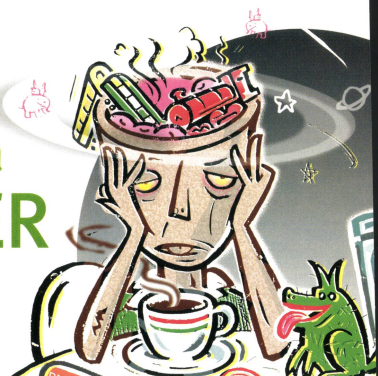
Global Flower Services (Teleflora)

Interflora


Petals Network

How to handle a HANGOVER

There's no miracle cure, but some things do help.



IN BRIEF

- **Water, a painkiller,** *something to eat if you can and rest are about all you can do — see* The four-point plan, *below.*
- **A little 'hair of the dog'** *will only put off the inevitable symptoms; see right.*
- **You feel appalling** *because your body's been poisoned by alcohol.*
- **The only way** *to prevent a hangover is to take it easy on the alcohol.*

The medical term for hangover, veisalgia, *comes from the Norwegian* kveis, *which means 'uneasiness following debauchery' and the Greek* algia, *which means 'pain'.*

You feel so bad you're worried you're about to die, then the next minute it occurs to you that you might not — with a raging hangover it's hard to know which seems worse. This article looks at suggested 'cures' (and some tips on prevention) in time for the Christmas season.

Everyone has their own particular hangover remedy — everything from paracetamol and heaps of water to bloody Marys with a raw egg. But there's been very little research into whether anything actually works: the argument goes that a hangover 'cure' would just encourage moderate drinkers to overindulge. However, because researchers have a fair idea of what causes hangovers (see *Why, oh why?,* above right) we also have a fair idea of which things are most likely to help.

THE FOUR-POINT PLAN

At the risk of sounding like your mother, of course if you don't drink too much you won't get a hangover. But, if you realise it's going to be bad — real bad — what can you do?

- **Drink water.** Start by alternating alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks, but even if it's too late for that, drink several glasses of water before bed and top up when you wake up. CHOICE doesn't often recommend sports drinks, but they may help top up fluid, sugar and salt levels.
- **Take a painkiller when you wake.** Paracetamol should help your headache, and it's easier on an already alcohol-affected stomach than aspirin or ibuprofen. But if a hangover is a regular feature of your life it may be best to check with your doctor. If you're a regular heavy drinker, taking paracetamol increases your risk of liver damage, and taking aspirin or ibuprofen, of stomach bleeding. And there's no strong evidence that taking painkillers before you go to bed will help — the effects will wear off while you're sleeping and you'll still need more when you wake.
- **Try to eat something when you wake up.** It will help replace lost nutrients and boost your blood sugar, and many people say it helps settle their stomach too. Even a glass of milk is better than nothing.
- **Take it easy.** Get some sleep if you can — you'll feel better if you catch up. And even if your blood alcohol is back to normal, you're not firing on all cylinders, so take care on the roads and at work.

THE HAIR OF THE DOG AND OTHER POPULAR REMEDIES

Some hangover cures are weird and wonderful, but there's a grain of truth in many of them. Here's a rundown on some of the most popular suspects and why, in theory at least, a few just might help:

- **Hair of the dog that bit you.** It sounds ridiculous, but many hangover-cure concoctions include a shot of some alcohol

MARK TREMLETT

Why, oh why?

Hangovers are caused by drinking too much ... there's no Nobel Prize for figuring that out. But exactly why do you wake up feeling so awful?

Alcohol dehydrates you. Even though you're drinking fluids, the alcohol makes your body lose more water than it takes in. This internal drought not only gives you a dry mouth and a raging thirst, but is probably one of the causes of the headache and general feeling that you'd rather be dead.

You lose body salts. As your body loses water, out go valuable salts like sodium, potassium, calcium and magnesium. This upsets brain signals and may be the reason for the fog that surrounds you and the feeling that you can't think clearly the next day.

Your blood sugar's low. Alcohol can block your body's ability to produce glucose — this leaves you wobbly and weak. Along with the effect on muscles of some breakdown products of alcohol, you end up a jelly-like wreck.

Drinking alcohol to excess poisons you. Alcoholic drinks contain ethanol, which your liver can break down without too many problems. It's the smaller amounts of methanol that break down into acetaldehyde that can cause queasiness, even nausea, and of course are another reason for the headache.

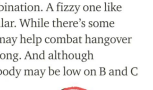
As if that's not enough, other substances called **cogeners** give alcoholic drinks their flavour, colour and aroma, and these also act as toxins. Dark-coloured drinks like rum, brandy and red wine tend to have more than lighter ones like vodka, gin or white wine, so they're more likely to cause the worst hangovers.

You're short of sleep. A few drinks may send you off quickly, but alcohol disrupts your sleep pattern and deprives you of deep, restful (REM) sleep — and you've probably been up half the night, too.

Your eyes are bloodshot. Alcohol dilates blood vessels, so you look awful as well as feeling it — but don't expect much sympathy ...

or other; some people just take another nip of scotch or a beer. In fact, a quick drink might seem to make you feel better for a while — it can postpone the breakdown of methanol and other cogeners (see *Why, oh why?*), as the body tackles the fresh ethanol first. It may also act as a painkiller. But you can't put off the evil hour forever: those hangover symptoms will return, possibly worse than before.

A vitamin tablet. People usually talk about taking a B vitamin or B and C combination. A fizzy one like Berocca is especially popular. While there's some evidence that vitamin B_5 may help combat hangover symptoms, it's not that strong. And although dehydration means your body may be low on B and C vitamins, it's uncertain whether topping these up will help improve hangover symptoms.



Raw egg. This is often a key ingredient in the concoctions people swear by — and it's not necessarily a myth. Eggs contain an amino acid called cysteine, which some scientists think may help the body to produce glutathione, a substance that helps the body's enzymes deal with a flood of alcohol. You can also buy cysteine supplements from healthfood stores.

Vegemite toast. It's full of B vitamins, so the same comments apply as for vitamins. In fact eating anything is a good idea: in this case the salt and other nutrients should help to replace what you've lost.

A fried breakfast. The eggs contain cysteine and food will provide salts, vitamins and sugars that have been lost — but it doesn't need to be a high-fat fry-up.

Lots of coffee. The caffeine in coffee or tea will help wake you up and make you feel better. But go easy — too much caffeine makes your body lose more water, which just makes things worse.

Cola or energy drinks. Both will help replace sugar and fluids but, again, the caffeine in cola and some energy drinks won't necessarily improve matters.

Things like Alka Seltzer are combination remedies — they contain a painkiller (in this case aspirin) and bicarbonate to settle your stomach, so they may be helpful, but don't take them on top of other painkillers.

The herb milk thistle (or St Mary's thistle) is sometimes recommended for hangovers. There's some evidence that it may help an already damaged liver, but studies haven't looked at whether it can prevent damage from happening or help with a hangover. So don't count on it to protect you.

Work it off. Some people insist that going for a run, hitting the gym or mowing the lawn works wonders (others consider this approach somewhat deranged). However, if you can face it, exercise may take your mind off the hangover, get the blood pumping and speed up detoxification — but drink plenty of water before, during and after. ■

AVOIDING THE RISK

Is there such a thing as low-risk drinking? To keep your risk of alcohol-related problems low, women should have no more than two standard drinks a day and men four. And everyone should have at least two alcohol-free days each week. A standard drink is roughly:

- *Spirits: 30 mL nip.*
- *Port: 60 mL glass.*
- *Wine : 100 mL glass.*
- *Full-strength beer: 250 mL glass (½ can).*
- *Low-alcohol beer: 375 mL can.*

GETTING TO KI

A disc by any other name...

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Hooking up a DVD** *player to the rest of your system — be it a stereo TV, a normal audio system or surround sound — can be complicated. Here's what you need to know.*
- **When you buy** *a DVD player, make sure you know how you want to connect it to the rest of your system, and buy the necessary cables at the same time.*
- **If you're buying DVDs overseas** *or via the Internet, make sure your player can handle the region coding.*

Whether they're called digital versatile discs or digital video discs, it's not a very exciting name for one of the most successful technologies of the last century. Names aside, this success probably has a lot to do with good-quality sound and pictures on an easily stored, robust disc. No more the problem of the kids' favourite video tape wearing out and ruining the heads on your VCR.

However, DVD players have to track information on a spiral of bumps only 740 nanometres wide, spinning somewhere between 200 and 500 rpm. They're sophisticated devices and, like all new technologies, they bring with them new jargon. This is a short guide to the technology and some of the things you'll need to consider before buying a DVD player.

THE DISC

A DVD looks very similar to a compact disc (CD). They have the same shape and diameter and even share some materials and manufacturing methods. However, even though both use a laser beam bouncing off a reflective surface to get the information from the disc into the player's software, there are some big differences from a CD in the amount of information a DVD can hold and the way it's stored.

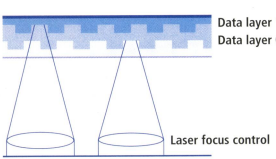


Figure 1. DVD construction (edge-on), showing the two data layers. Also see The disc, *above, and* Dual-layer format, *page 34.*

Typically a music CD can hold around 70 to 80 minutes of sound and a CD-R for your computer will manage around 650 MB of data. A DVD can take about 4.38 GB of data per layer, which translates to around two hours of compressed video. This is possible because the bumps on the DVD are smaller than on a CD.

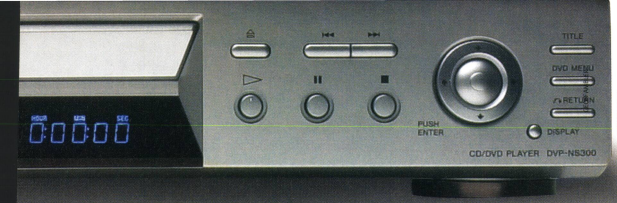
In fact many DVDs are dual-layer, which means they have two layers of reflective material, one on top of the other (see Figure 1). These layers have different reflective properties, which make it possible for the laser beam to focus on one or the other. The result is a little less than twice the information per side, and you don't have to turn the disc over to continue watching your movie. Some DVDs have dual layers on both sides, giving over eight hours of video.

THE DATA

In order to get enough information on the disc for you to be able to see a complete movie with surround sound, it's necessary to compress the data. This is done using a compression technique developed by the Moving Picture Expert Group (MPEG). The current standard for this is called MPEG-2, and all DVD players can uncompress it as fast as you can watch it.

THE PLAYER

Most of the work is done in the player. This is where the laser is housed, along with the necessary software and hardware to decode the information on the DVD and transmit it to your TV and audio equipment. In most cases you'll find there's more than one way to do this.



GEOFF AMBLER

...W YOUR DVD

Video

Getting the video signal from your DVD player to your TV is often done with a single **composite-video** cable. It usually has a yellow plastic insert and connects the 'video out' socket on the DVD player to the 'video in' socket on your TV. It's adequate, but there are better options.

The next-best method is a single four-pin cable called **S-video**, which gives a better video signal. You'll need an S-video output on your DVD and input on your TV.

The best signal is from a connection called **component video**. This has three cables, each of which carries a different part of the signal. It's not all that common at present, but newer TVs may have it.

Depending on your system, some of these cables can pass through your amplifier first, allowing control of some aspects of the sound from onscreen menus.

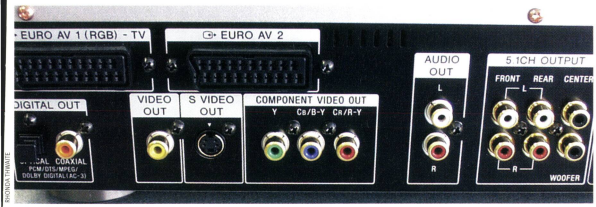
In some cases you might find a SCART connection on both the TV and DVD player, which may give you composite, S-video or component video in one cable.

Audio

Unfortunately sound isn't quite as simple as video. Your choice of sound system can determine the nature as well as the quality of the sound you'll get from a DVD. An additional problem is that DVDs may come with a number of sound formats — the most common are MPEG, Dolby Digital 5.1 and Digital Theatre Systems (DTS). You may get a choice between these three formats on some DVDs. Even if a player can't decode the surround sound signal, it can pass it on to your sound system to be decoded or played in stereo.

DVD players can have a combination of the following audio outputs:

- A single coaxial or optical digital connection, which leaves the decoding to your audio system.
- A six-channel analogue connection that'll do the decoding before the signal is sent to your audio system.
- A simple two-cable stereo signal that goes to your stereo TV or sound system.



BRENDAN THWAITES

The 'Euro AV' connections are SCART, and the 'video out' is a composite-video connection; see Video *and* Audio, *above, for more on all these connections.*

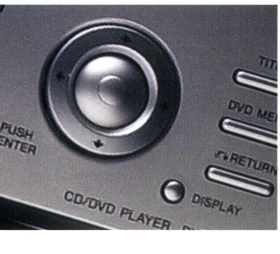
These are in descending order of sound quality, but you'll need a good system and ear to pick the difference between the digital and six-channel options.

The digital signal won't present a problem for most stereo systems because it'll be decoded by the DVD player and passed on to your sound system as a stereo signal. If you've got an amplifier with Dolby Pro Logic, it'll break that signal up into as many channels as you have speakers attached, but it won't be proper surround sound because it'll still only be a stereo signal.

To get the benefit of true surround sound from the MPEG, Dolby Digital 5.1 or DTS on the DVD, you'll need a sound system that can either decode this digital signal, or deal with the already decoded signal via a six-channel input (five speakers and a subwoofer).

Some DVD players have a built-in surround sound decoder and six-channel output (see our test of DVD players, right). The latter is an advantage if your sound system has the six-channel input but can't decode the digital MPEG, Dolby Digital or DTS sound signal.

DVD players will also play music CDs, and some more expensive models can play a new format called Audio DVD. Normal DVD players have a digital-to-analogue converter (DAC) that can handle 96 kHz/24-bit, which is sufficient for converting normal CDs and DVD movie sound. Audio DVD needs a DAC that can handle 192 kHz/24-bit. The test of DVD players has more on playing CDs using a DVD. ■



GEOFF ANDELFE

What do all these things on the label mean?

PAL: Phase alternating line; this is the television standard used in Australia. The US standard is NTSC and the two aren't compatible.

Region code: Buy a player on a trip overseas or order a disc over the Internet, and you may be in for a nasty surprise. Region coding splits the world into a number of zones — we're in zone 4 — but some players can be modified to play discs from any region. The legality of this is under some question and you should check to ensure removing the zoning restriction won't affect your warranty.

CHOICE thinks the zoning system is potentially anti-competitive and has asked the ACCC to investigate and act to ensure consumers aren't disadvantaged.

OFLC rating: The Office of Film and Literature Classification provides an age suitability rating based on factors such as violence, nudity, bad language and sexual content.

Dolby Digital and **DTS** are audio encoding standards (see *Audio*, page 33).

MPEG: All DVDs are MPEG-2 encoded (see *The data*, page 32), but on a label this usually indicates that the DVD has MPEG sound (see *Audio*).

Aspect ratio/s: You'll find all sorts of descriptions, including 1.85:1, 4:3 transfer, 1.33:1, 1.66:1, widescreen, deluxe widescreen, 16:9 enhanced, matted widescreen. Some DVDs will give you a choice of a couple of aspect ratios and all the players in our test (right) can vary them to suit your TV. The important thing to remember is that a standard TV screen has an aspect ratio of 4:3, which means for every centimetre of height it's 1.33 centimetres wide. So when you see 4:3 or 1.33:1, think normal TV.

A 16:9 ratio is around 1.8:1 and will result in black bars at the top and bottom of a normal TV screen. This use of black bars is often called letterboxing. The term 'widescreen' is also often applied to a 16:9 aspect ratio. If the aspect ratio is described as 'enhanced' or 'deluxe' widescreen, it's probably at a ratio closer to 2.35:1, which will mean black bars even on a 16:9 TV and even deeper black bars on a normal TV.

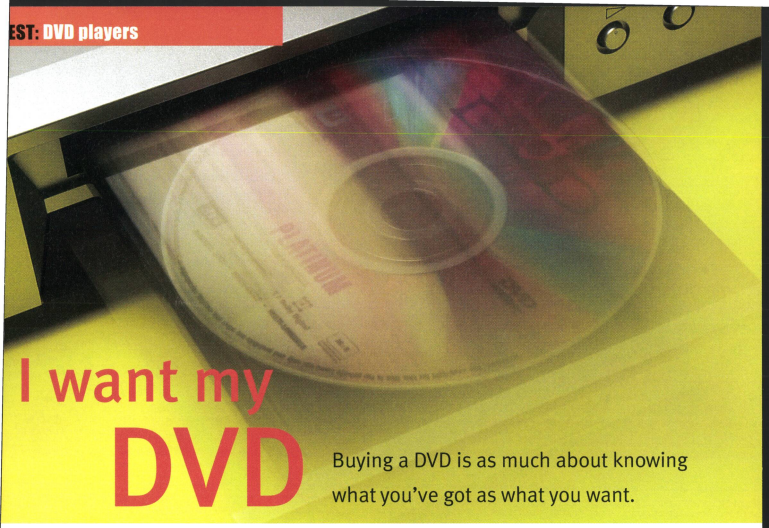
Special features: These usually include things like subtitles, interactive menus, different camera angles, a choice of languages, biographies, film commentaries, interactive programs you can run on your computer or just about anything the designers think might add to your enjoyment of the movie.

Dual-layer format: One or both sides have two layers with differing reflective properties, one on top of the other. The data is represented by very small bumps in a spiral pattern on each of the layers. These spirals are slightly offset to help avoid errors when the laser is focused on one or the other (see *The disc*, page 32, for more on this).

Sound: 5.1 is surround sound with a subwoofer for extra bass, 5.0 is surround sound without a subwoofer, 2.0 is normal stereo sound. Which one you use will depend on your sound system's capabilities and what's available on the disc.

Copy protection/Macrovision is a piece of electronics that makes it possible to watch the movie on your TV, but not record it on a VCR (see *When macro means less*, page 38).

PC friendly: Usually this means there's some data or program included that'll run on your computer.



I want my DVD

Buying a DVD is as much about knowing what you've got as what you want.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **All DVD players** *in this test can provide better picture and sound than a VCR, but there could be hidden costs if you need to upgrade your TV and sound system.*
- **While there may not be** *much difference in picture and sound quality, some are definitely easier to use and only one could handle a badly damaged DVD.*
- **We were unable** *to pick any significant difference between the sound from the DVDs in this test and from a CD player.*

You can buy a DVD player from as little as $199, or you can spend thousands of dollars. Our research tells us many people are spending around $400 to $550, so we checked out 13 players in this price range.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Before you go out and buy a DVD player, check your sound system's and TV's capabilities. Here are some of the things you'll need to know.

Video: What connections are available on your TV? Typically you'll find one or a combination of the following: RF (normal aerial); yellow composite-video in (RCA); four-pin S-video or component video with three (red, green and blue) RCA sockets. Some TVs might also have a SCART connection, which can combine some of these into one cable. See *Getting to know your DVD*, page 32, for photos of these connections and more information on what they mean.

If you only have an RF connection you'll need to get a new TV if you're even thinking about a DVD player (see *When macro means less*, page 38).

Only newer TVs are likely to have component-video input, which gives the best possible picture. However, S-video will be more than adequate for most people and even a composite-video connection is likely to be a great deal better than your normal video quality. So if your TV has any of these connections, don't rush out and buy a new one until you've seen the picture from a DVD player on your current one.

WHAT TO BUY

PIONEER DV-344	$499
PANASONIC DVD-RV31	$549
SONY DVP-NS300	$499
NEC NDV-22	$469
LG DV4721P	$399
LG DV4741P	$499
SAMSUNG DVD-M205	$449
TOSHIBA SD-1300	$499
AKAI ADV-8000	$469

All the products in this test deliver good picture and sound quality. The **PIONEER DV-344** is particularly easy to use, but all the models in the *What to buy* list are also fine in this area.

The **PANASONIC DVD-RV31** is exceptionally good at dealing with damaged discs. The **PIONEER DV-344** and **SONY DVP-NS300** use very little power in standby mode, and the **NEC NDV-22** has one of the best remote controls.

Audio: You can listen to the sound from a DVD player through your TV, which would probably be fine for old movies with mono soundtracks. Or if you have a reasonable stereo system, you can connect the stereo audio outputs from the DVD to the audio inputs on your amplifier to get stereo sound.

However, if you want a true home theatre experience you'll need a surround sound system. This usually involves five speakers (two in front, two behind and one centre front) and can also include a special speaker called a subwoofer that deals with low frequencies, adding richness and impact. This is often referred to as a 5.1 surround sound system.

Check your sound system's amplifier to ensure it not only has outputs for all these speakers, but either is capable of decoding the digital sound signals from a DVD player (MPEG, Dolby Digital and/or DTS), or has the six inputs necessary for a 5.1 DVD player that will do it instead before the signal reaches the amp. The amp's manual should have this information if it isn't already printed on the amp itself. See *Getting to know your DVD* for more on MPEG, Dolby Digital and DTS.

If your amp can decode the DVD sound signal, there's no point buying a DVD player with a decoder and six channel outputs. For instance, the two LGs are almost identical. The main difference between them is that the **LG DV4741P** has six-channel decoded surround sound output sockets. If you're thinking of buying one of these products and your sound system can decode MPEG, Dolby Digital and/or DTS, you could save yourself around $100 by purchasing the cheaper model (the **LG DV4721P**). Be careful, though: just because your amplifier can decode MPEG and Dolby Digital doesn't automatically mean it can also handle DTS. Check the manual, and if it doesn't tell you, call the manufacturer.

Now you know your system you'll be better able to decide what features and functions you need on a DVD player.

Features they (almost) all have

For playing a DVD

- Only the **AKAI ADV-8000** and **NEC NDV-22** don't have component-video connections. They all have S-video and composite-video output sockets.
- Stereo audio output sockets.
- Digital audio output socket. The **NEC NDV-22** has only a coaxial and the **PANASONIC DVD-RV31** only an optical connection. Check your sound system can handle these inputs if you're considering one of these products. The rest have both.
- Play DVD video, CD audio and video CD (VCD).
- Aspect ratios: To suit your TV screen, they can display the image in 4:3 letterbox (essentially 16:9, with black bars top and bottom of a normal TV screen), 4:3 pan & scan (fills the screen without black bars, but you lose some of the image so that it isn't distorted — as far as we know, this function has yet to be incorporated into any DVD) and widescreen 16:9 aspect ratios.
- Output sound in stereo, Dolby Digital and DTS formats.
- Skip to the start of the previous/next chapter.
- Fast view forward or reverse (see the table for the number of speed settings).
- Slow view forward or reverse (see the table for the number of speed settings). The **TOSHIBA SD-1300** doesn't have a slow reverse function.
- Still or pause.
- Step-by-step forward movement. The **SONY DVP-NS300** doesn't have this function and only the **KENWOOD**, **PANASONIC** and **PIONEER** can reverse in steps.
- Replay a user-selected segment (regardless of where the segment begins or ends).
- Play one title or chapter repeatedly.
- Resume play at a particular place on the DVD after the stop button is pressed.
- Selectable camera angle, subtitle language and dialogue language.
- Parental control lock.

For playing a music CD

- Skip to the start of the previous or next track.
- Fast play forward or reverse (see the table for the number of speed settings). The **SONY DVP-NS300** has no reverse function.
- Pause.
- Replay a user-selected segment.
- Play one track repeatedly.
- Play all tracks repeatedly.
- Shuffle mode (tracks played in a random order). The **RANK ARENA DVD2400** doesn't have this feature.
- Programmed play mode.

Features some have

- **Bookmarking** allows you to mark the beginning of a scene so you can return to it easily (see the table for players with this function).
- **Zoom** allows you to magnify a single scene (see the table for players with this function).
- **Simulated surround sound** produces a surround-like sound out of non-surround-sound stereo material. All but the **KENWOOD** and **PIONEER** have this feature. It's often referred to as 3D sound, but **PANASONIC** and **RANK ARENA** call it VSS and **SONY** TVS.
- The **AKAI**, **RANK ARENA**, **JNL 7003** and **LG DV4741P** have **six-channel decoded audio output sockets**. This is useful if you want DTS sound but your six-channel amplifier can't decode it (see *Audio*, page 33 and above, for more on this).
- The **AKAI**, both **JNLs** and the **RANK ARENA**, have two **microphone** input sockets and **karaoke** controls on the front panel.
- **Dynamic range control** makes dialogue clearer at lower volume levels. All but the **AKAI** and **JNLs** have this feature.
- **Selectable picture setting** (picture enhancements or brightness settings). The **PANASONIC**, **PIONEER**, **RANK ARENA**, and **TOSHIBA** have this function.
- **One-touch skip** to the start of the current chapter. All but the **AKAI**, **JNLs** and **RANK ARENA** have this feature.
- **Programmed play** mode allows you to play all or one of your programmed steps repeatedly.
- **Onscreen display in languages** other than English. All but the **AKAI**, **JNLs** and **RANK ARENA** have this feature.

Profiles

The models in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order from left to right. Prices shown are recommended retail, as provided by manufacturers in October 2001. You can probably do better if you shop around.

PIONEER DV-344

Price: $499

GOOD POINTS

- Very well-presented onscreen menu.
- Easy-to-use front panel indicator.
- Time-remaining indicator.
- Program information on front panel indicator during set-up.
- Uses very little power when on standby.

BAD POINTS

- None to mention.

NEC NDV-22*

Price: $469

GOOD POINTS

- Very good remote control.
- Very well-presented onscreen menu.

BAD POINTS

- Some onscreen symbols aren't intuitive.

* This model has been discontinued, but the manufacturer says the new model (NDV-22R) is essentially the same, but has CD-R, CD-RW and MP3 compatibility.

SAMSUNG DVD-M205

Price: $449

GOOD POINTS

- Very well-presented onscreen menu.
- Program information on front panel indicator during set-up.

BAD POINTS

- The front panel time indicator lacks clear separation between hours, minutes and seconds.
- Some onscreen symbols aren't intuitive.

PANASONIC DVD-RV31

Price: $549

GOOD POINTS

- Very well-presented onscreen menu.
- Very easy to program CD playback.
- Program information on front panel indicator during set-up.

BAD POINTS

- Commonly used keys are too close to the top of the remote, making one-handed use difficult.
- Some onscreen display characters are small.
- Some onscreen symbols aren't intuitive.

LG DV4721P

Price: $399

GOOD POINTS

- Very well-presented onscreen menu.

BAD POINTS

- Some onscreen display characters are small.
- The function of some onscreen symbols isn't immediately obvious.

TOSHIBA SD-1300

Price: $499

GOOD POINTS

- Very well-presented onscreen menu.
- Time-remaining indicator.

BAD POINTS

- Commonly used keys are too close to the top of the remote, making one-handed use difficult.
- The front panel indicator doesn't show the title/chapter/track numbers.
- Doesn't have a graphical onscreen table for setting programmed playback, and shows only one program item at a time.

SONY DVP-NS300

Price: $499

GOOD POINTS

- Very well-presented onscreen menu.
- Program information on front panel indicator during set-up.
- Uses very little power when on standby.
- Time-remaining indicator.

BAD POINTS

- No number keys on the remote control.
- Some onscreen symbols aren't intuitive.

LG DV4741P

Price: $499

GOOD POINTS

- Very well-presented onscreen menu.

BAD POINTS

- Some onscreen display characters are small.
- Some onscreen symbols aren't intuitive.

AKAI ADV-8000

Price: $469

GOOD POINTS

- Very good remote control.
- Large onscreen text.

BAD POINTS

- Some onscreen menu options aren't clear.
- No instructions on how to perform programmed playback.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

The KENWOOD, both JNLs and the RANK ARENA aren't as easy to use as the models in the *What to buy* list, and have very poor scores for standby energy use. They're just as good as the other models for picture quality and, except for the RANK ARENA, for sound.

Brand / model (in rank order)	PERFORMANCE 1 Overall score (%)	2 Picture quality score (%)	3 Sound quality score (%)	4 Ease of use score (%)	5 Faulty disc handling score (%)	6 Standby energy (%)	7 FEATURES Bookmarking	Zoom	Simulate surround sound
PIONEER DV-344	87	96	91	80	79	90			
PANASONIC DVD-RV31	86	96	89	71	99	70	✓		✓
SONY DVP-NS300	85	96	90	72	78	90			✓
NEC NDV-22 **(A)**	83	84	87	79	88	70	✓	✓	✓
LG DV4721P	82	84	86	75	90	70	✓	✓	✓
LG DV4741P	82	84	87	75	90	70	✓	✓	✓
SAMSUNG DVD-M205	82	96	91	69	84	60	✓	✓	✓
TOSHIBA SD-1300	82	92	91	63	86	80		✓	✓
AKAI ADV-8000	79	96	87	74	83	20		✓	✓
KENWOOD DVF-3550S	73	96	89	59	78	5	✓		
JNL 7003	72	88	85	61	88	5		✓	✓
JNL 7002	71	88	84	60	83	5	✓	✓	✓
RANK ARENA DVD2400	71	92	79	56	88	5		✓	✓

MISSING BRANDS

*Unfortunately we couldn't buy a **JVC**, **PHILIPS** or **TEAC** product for this test that would still be available by the time this article's published. Hopefully they'll have models available for our next test.*

MARCUS MARSHALL

When macro means less

Macrovision is a system designed to make it harder to pirate copyright video material. Unfortunately it mainly affects the video signal and makes it impossible to connect your DVD player to your TV via a VCR. One result of this limitation is that you can't use a DVD player with an old TV that has only an RF signal input by routing it through your VCR (DVD players don't have an RF output).

Admittedly the picture and sound quality from RF are unlikely to be as good as the quality of any of the other types of connections, but in our opinion it's an unnecessary limitation. We think this type of copy protection is unlikely to impede determined commercial-level copyright piracy and is a cost that's no doubt included in the price of every copy-protected DVD.

NTSC vs PAL

NTSC is a TV system that's mainly used in the US. It's not compatible with our PAL system, so if you're thinking of buying a DVD overseas or via the Internet, being able to convert the DVD signal from NTSC to PAL could be useful.

All but the **KENWOOD**, **PANASONIC**, **PIONEER**, **SONY** and **TOSHIBA** can play an NTSC DVD and produce a PAL-compatible output. Both the **LGs**, the **NEC**, **PANASONIC**, **PIONEER** and **SAMSUNG** can play an NTSC DVD and produce a pseudo PAL-compatible output (basically a PAL signal, but at 60 Hz), which requires a TV that can handle 60 Hz signals as well as the normal 50 Hz signal (most modern TVs can).

All but the **LGs**, **NEC** and **SAMSUNG** can play an NTSC DVD and produce an NTSC-compatible output. You'd need a TV that can handle NTSC to see the picture, though.

				SPECIFICATIONS			
D-R / RW / P3	DVD fast-motion forward / reverse	DVD slow-motion forward / reverse	CD fast forward / reverse	Dimensions (H x W x D, cm)*	Origin	Warranty (years)	Price ($)**
✓ / ✓ / ✗	1	4 / 1	1	10 x 42 x 28	China	1	499
✓ / ✓ / ✗	5	5	5	9 x 43 x 26	Japan	1 **(C)**	549
✓ / ✓ / ✗	3	2	3 / na	8 x 43 x 26	Malaysia	1 **(D)**	499
✓ / ✗ / ✗	4	4	4	9 x 43 x 26	Korea	1	469
✓ / ✓ / ✓	4	4	4	9 x 43 x 26	China	1	399
✓ / ✓ / ✓	4	4	4	9 x 43 x 26	China	1	499
✓ / ✓ / ✓	6	3	3	8 x 43 x 27	Korea	1	449
✓ / ✓ / ✓	4	3 / na	2	9 x 43 x 23	China	1	499
✓ / ✓ / ✓	4	6	3	9 x 43 x 31	China	1	469
✓ / ✓ / ✗ **(B)**	4	4	3	11 x 44 x 33	China	1	559
✓ / ✓ / ✓	4	4	4	8 x 44 x 31	China	1	449
✗ / ✗ / ✗ **(B)**	4	6	3	8 x 43 x 32	China	1	349
✓ / ✓ / ✓	4	3	2	8 x 43 x 31	China	1	449

* *Rounded up to the next centimetre, all protruding parts except the cord included.*

** *Prices shown are recommended retail, as provided by manufacturers in October 2001. You can probably do better if you shop around.*

na *Not applicable: the model doesn't have this feature.*

(A) *Discontinued in November 2001. The manufacturer says the new model (NEC NDV-22R) is essentially the same, but has CD-R, CD-RW and MP3 compatibility.*

(B) *Claimed MP3 but wouldn't play our test disk.*

(C) *Additional two years for $20, four years $90.*

(D) *Additional two years for $99.*

Regions

Each DVD is encoded with a particular region. This has nothing to do with the inherent characteristics of the format, but is a convenient way for content owners, with the co-operation of equipment makers, to control the reproduction and distribution of DVD movie content.

The major film producers/distributors have split the world into a number of regions or zones. Discs are encoded with a region code and will only play on players with a matching region code. Manufacturers claim the zoning system is designed to counter consumer-level copying, but CHOICE thinks it may be intended to structure the global market to the advantage of the content producers by limiting availability in selected regions. Consumers shouldn't have to put up with such a restrictive system.

The regions are:

0. All regions.
1. US, Canada, US territories.
2. Japan, western Europe, South Africa and the Middle East (including Egypt).
3. Southeast and east Asia (including Hong Kong).
4. Australia, New Zealand, Pacific islands, Central America, South America and the Caribbean.
5. Eastern Europe (including ex-USSR), Indian subcontinent, Africa, North Korea and Mongolia.
6. China.
7. Reserved.
8. Special international venues (planes, cruise ships).

Only the **AKAI** and **JNL 7002** come with instructions on how to change the player's region code, but the **JNL 7003** and **RANK ARENA** will do it if you press the right combination of keys (contact the manufacturer for the information). The others are restricted to playing zone 4 discs only.

1 Overall score

The overall score is a combination of the following:
Picture quality: 25%
Sound quality: 20%
Ease of use: 25%
Faulty disc handling: 20%
Standby energy: 10%

2 Picture quality

This was checked using standard patterns and still pictures as well as some movies. Our experienced testers looked for centring, brightness, sharpness, straight unwavering lines and colour purity without distortions.

3 Sound quality

We listened for differences when the sound was coming from the digital, analogue and six-channel decoded outputs, where these were available. Level linearity, total harmonic distortion, signal-to-noise ratio and channel separation were also measured. A comparison was made with a CD player, but we could hear no discernible difference in sound quality.

4 Ease of use

Various 'actual use' tasks were performed, following the instruction manuals. However, if a task could be done with little or no use of the instructions, the model scored better. We looked at:

- Remote controls.
- Front panel controls.
- Front panel indicator.
- Programming DVD and CD playback.

5 Faulty disc handling

We used a standard test CD with interruptions on the data surface and black dots on the readout surface to simulate scratches and dirt respectively. We also created a similarly damaged DVD but with deeper scratches and larger black dots. This is a pretty tough test.

6 Standby energy

We measured the power used by each player in standby mode. The **PIONEER DV-344** and **SONY DVP-NS300** did particularly well, drawing less than one watt. The worst were the **JNL 7003** and **KENWOOD DVF-3550S**, which drew over 12 W; the others with a score of 5 drew 9–12 W.

7 Features

See *Features*, page 36, for explanations of bookmark, zoom, simulated surround sound and six-channel decoded audio outputs (also see *Audio*, page 36).

- **CD-R/RW/MP3**

Playing music on homemade CDs is becoming more popular. A tick indicates the DVD player can handle this format.

- **DVD fast motion**

The number indicates the number of speed settings for both forward and reverse. (eg; 4 = 4 forward and 4 reverse)

- **DVD slow motion**

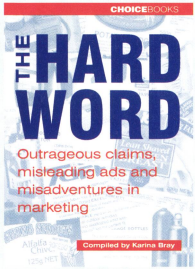
If there's only one number, it indicates the number of speed settings for both forward and reverse. The **PIONEER DV-344** has four forward settings but only one reverse; the **TOSHIBA SD-1300** has no reverse.

- **CD fast forward/reverse**

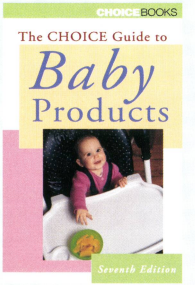
The number indicates speed settings for both forward and reverse. The **SONY DVP-NS300** doesn't have a reverse function.

SPECIAL CHR

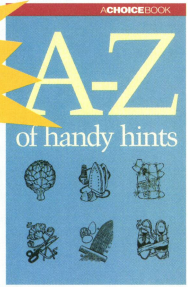
10% OFF ALL ORDERS until 21/12/01!



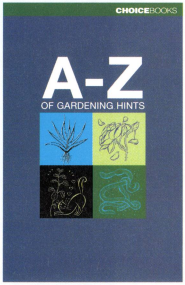
THE HARD WORD
CODE: HDWD $ 18.00



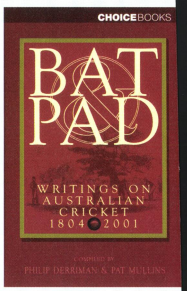
THE CHOICE GUIDE TO BABY PRODUCTS
7th edition
CODE: CBP7 $ 20.00



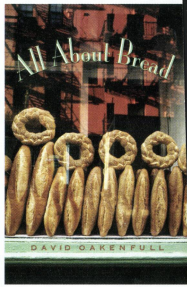
A–Z OF HANDY HINTS
CODE: AZHH $ 16.50



A–Z OF GARDENING HINTS
CODE: AZGH $ 20.00



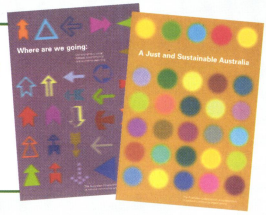
BAT & PAD
CODE: B&P $ 35.00



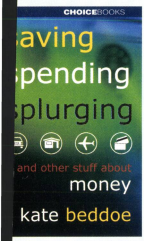
ALL ABOUT BREAD
CODE: BRD $ 25.00

Read the Australian Collaboration's reports about the social, cultural and environmental issues facing Australia at present or in the near future.

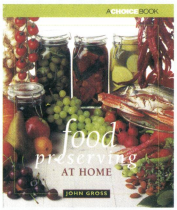
Ring (03) 9645 7977 for more details or to buy a copy of either report.



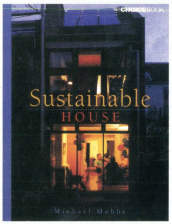
TMAS OFFER!



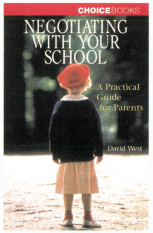
VING, SPENDING, LURGING
DE: SSS $ 20.00



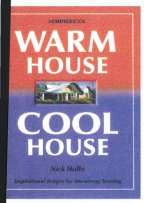
FOOD PRESERVING AT HOME
CODE: FPAH $ 29.70



SUSTAINABLE HOUSE
CODE: SUSH $ 35.00

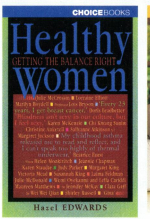


NEGOTIATING WITH YOUR SCHOOL
CODE: NWYS $ 20.00



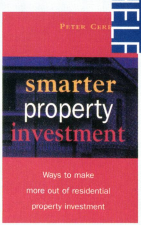
ARM HOUSE
OOL HOUSE
DDE: WHCH $ 33.00

EAT GST FREE!
CODE: EGST $ 22.00



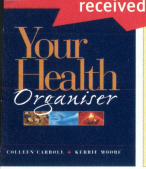
HEALTHY WOMEN
CODE: HEWO $ 25.00

EARNING MONEY FROM HOME
CODE: EMFH $ 25.00



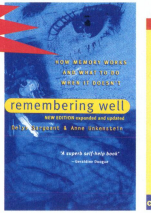
SMARTER PROPERTY INVESTMENT
CODE: SPI $ 24.95

To receive your books by Christmas, orders must be received by 12/12/01.

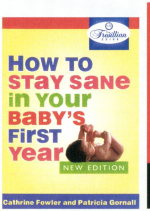


OUR HEALTH RGANISER
ODE: YHO $ 22.00

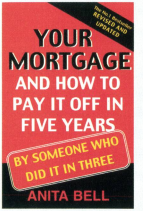
OUR HOME
CODE: OURH $ 20.00



REMEMBERING WELL
2nd edition
CODE: RWL2 $ 19.95

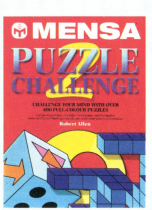


HOW TO STAY SANE IN YOUR BABY'S FIRST YEAR
New edition
CODE: SSBY $ 24.95

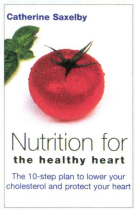


YOUR MORTGAGE AND HOW TO PAY IT OFF IN FIVE YEARS
CODE: YM5Y $ 15.95

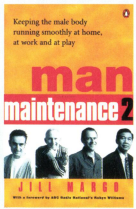
SPECIAL CHRISTMAS OFFER!



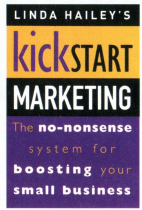
MENDA PUZZLE CHALLENGE 2
CODE: MPC2 $ 24.95



NUTRITION FOR THE HEALTHY HEART
CODE: NFHH $ 24.95

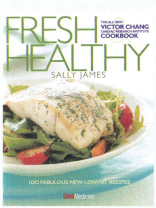


MAN MAINTENANCE 2
CODE: MMN2 $ 24.00



KICKSTART MARKETING
CODE: KICK $ 24.95

ALTERED GENES
CODE: AGII $ 30.00



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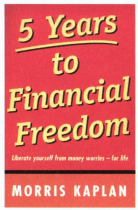
CODE: F&H $34.95



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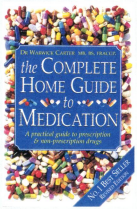

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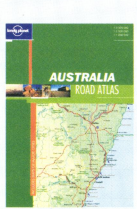

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Most PAINTS still lasting well

Four years down the track, nine paints are now best avoided.

IN A NUTSHELL

Most exterior paints are doing well, but...

- **Nine paints** *are just not up to the job (see* **What not to buy,** *right).*
- **Seven paints** *are best suited to exterior timber, rather than brick or concrete (see* Dirt or protection, *page 45).*

See CHOICE, *October 2000, for information on painting safely and only when doing it yourself, or go to www.choice.com.au and type 'exterior paint' in the search box.*

Our long-term durability test of exterior paint products will finish next year after five years, and we'll be able to pass final judgment on which paints have put in an above average performance and which haven't. This year there are a few more to add to the list of premature failures.

After nearly four years into this outdoor exposure test of over 100 paints, only nine can't be recommended (see *What **not** to buy*, right). A further seven are best suited to timber only (see *Dirt or protection?*, page 45).

Although most paints are still going strong at this four-year test mark, we still don't have a list of 'winners'. One or more of them could still develop

WHAT NOT TO BUY

Cracking:

- **LIVOS Vindo Coating Varnish** (white).
- **LIVOS Vindo Enamel Paint** (green).

Erosion of paint film:

- **DULUX Timbercolour Gloss Acrylic** (Brunswick green) — discontinued in 1999, but check your paintwork if you used it. It also rated badly for colour change after only three years in the test.

Gloss loss:

- **BERGER Full Gloss Enamel** (Brunswick green).
- **BIO 8 Different Colours Enamel Lacquer** (green).
- **TAUBMANS Ultra Enamel High Gloss** (mid Bristol green) — since reformulated, according to the manufacturer.

Colour change:

- **SOLVER Duraguard Low Sheen** acrylic (deep Brunswick green).

Chalking:

- **TARGET Sunblock Low Sheen Acrylic** (mid Bristol green — now discontinued).
- **TAUBMANS All Weather Gloss Acrylic** (mid Bristol green).

OUR TEST

Four years ago, we applied acrylic (water-based) and enamel (oil-based) paints to timber and fibro panels according to manufacturers' directions and the relevant Australian standard for the exposure testing of paints.

We make it even tougher for our painted test panels by inclining them at 45° facing north, which accelerates their aging. Four years in these harsh conditions roughly equate to eight years on your house.

On test are all finishes in white and the nearest colour to Brunswick green, made by the following manufacturers (including those made for other brand names, such as Target):

- Berger
- Bio
- Bristol
- British Paints
- Dulux
- Duralex
- Haymes
- Livos
- Pascol
- Solver
- Taubmans
- Walpamur
- Wattyl
- White Knight Paints

major structural faults over the next year. Since painting the outside of your house is a big job and a major expense, you want the longest life possible out of the paint.

THE POINT OF PAINT

The most important job paint does is protect the underlying building material. Any blistering, cracking, flaking or erosion in the paint film is a serious structural failure that could cause major damage. Timber is especially vulnerable and is expensive to repair. So it's reassuring that most of these exterior house paints, when used as their manufacturers direct, will probably last at least eight years (see *Our test*, above.

After just one year on test, **LIVOS Vindo Enamel Paint** (green) and **LIVOS Vindo Coating Varnish** (white) already showed serious cracks — they didn't last much longer than fish out of water. These paints have 'natural, solvent-free' formulations, which just aren't up to the job. At the four-year mark, these paints are still the only ones to show cracking defects.

JUST AS SERIOUS

Erosion of the paint film can be as dangerous to the underlying building material as cracking failures. This year **DULUX Timbercolour Gloss Acrylic** (Brunswick green) is the first paint we've seen in four years to show this defect — see the photo, below right. Although the **DULUX Timbercolour** range was discontinued in 1999, if you used it on your house it's worth watching out for this kind of defect.

WHERE'S THE GLOSS?

Enamel (oil-based) paints are recommended by the Australian standard for decorative trim work such as window frames and doors, partly because they have superior gloss performance compared to acrylic (water-based) paints.

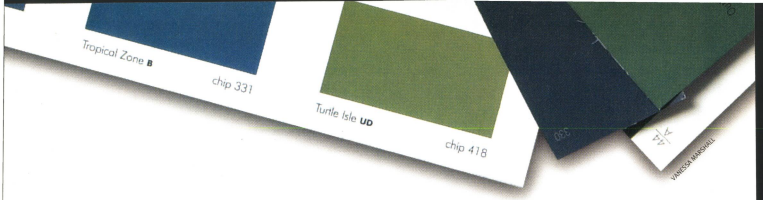
However, last year we found that all the green enamels were poor in terms of gloss loss. If you want a long-lasting enamel gloss shine, our test results suggest you choose a light colour.

Paints with particularly premature gloss loss were: **BIO 8 Different Colours Enamel Lacquer** (green), **TAUBMANS Ultra Enamel High Gloss** (mid Bristol green; since reformulated, according to the manufacturer) and **BERGER Full Gloss Enamel** (Brunswick green). These paints lost 97%, 82% and 73% of their gloss respectively on timber, after just one year on test. The **BIO 8** paint also rated very poorly for colour change after just one year on test.

The marginally best gloss performer on timber is **WATTYL High Gloss Enamel**, retaining 4% more gloss than any other green enamel paint — but it's still lost 85% of its original gloss.

FANCY A COLOUR CHANGE?

Last season 'Mango Sunset' might have been all the rage, now it could be 'Martian Sunset'. It's your choice — but you don't want the paint you bought making the decision for you. When you've finally settled on a colour, you want it to stay its original



ıade. You don't want a product that changes colour ɔo severely, or unsightly colour contrasts between ifferent parts of the house could develop.

Last year we couldn't recommend **SOLVER ıuraguard Low Sheen** acrylic (deep Brunswick reen) or **DULUX Timbercolour Gloss Acrylic** Brunswick green; now discontinued) because ıey rated much worse for colour change. After nother year in the blazing sun, the other green crylics still haven't shown this amount of olour deterioration.

'OO MUCH CHALK

he build-up of unsightly chalk is particularly oticeable on darker colours. Chalking is caused by he release of pigment powder as the paint film ages. t can happen to both enamel and acrylic paints.

This year two acrylic paints, **TARGET Sunblock ow Sheen Acrylic** (mid Bristol green; now liscontinued) and **TAUBMANS All Weather Gloss crylic** (mid Bristol green), showed much more halking than other dark green enamel or acrylic aints. For this reason we're including them in *What **not** to buy*. It's paticularly unsatisfactory that the **TAUBMANS** paint is a reformulated product we added to the test only last year. That it's shown such heavy chalking after only one year on test makes us wonder if the reformulation was less than successful.

DIRT OR PROTECTION?

Timber can expand and shrink with changes in heat and humidity. This makes it a real test of paint durability because paints have to be flexible enough to cope with the movement.

Softer paints have a potential advantage in that they may be better able to do this. However, there's a drawback — the softer the paint, the more dirt will settle into it.

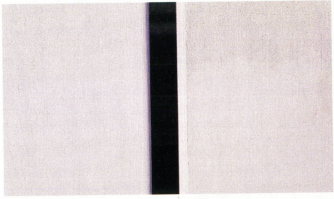
If you're painting a more stable building material, like brick, concrete or render, it makes sense to avoid softer paints that could become relatively dirty.

Last year we found that **SOLVER Duraguard Low Sheen** acrylic and **TAUBMANS Timbertop Low Sheen Acrylic** were consistently dirtier than other white acrylics. This doesn't make them poor paints, just better suited to exterior timber, where they could have a flexibility advantage, rather than to more stable materials like brick or concrete.

This year we've found another five white acrylic paints showing significant dirt pick-up: **DULUX Timbercolour Low Sheen Acrylic** (vivid white; since discontinued), **DULUX Weathershield Extreme Low Sheen** (vivid white; since reformulated and renamed **Weathershield X10 Low Sheen**), **PASCOL Suncreen Low Sheen** (white), **TARGET Sunblock Low Sheen Acrylic** (white; now discontinued) and **TAUBMANS All Weather Low Sheen Acrylic** (white). These paints too are best suited for exterior timber. ■

TIM TURNER

The surface erosion on Dulux Timbercolour Gloss Acrylic (Brunswick green) could lead to significant damage to your building materials, not to mention looking pretty unsightly. Check your paintwork if you used it on your home.



The dirt pick-up on Dulux Timbercolour Acrylic Low Sheen (vivid white) (top section of the right-hand panel) is similar to that of other 'softer' white acrylic paints, but much greater than the other white acrylic paints (left-hand panel). This makes these softer paints better choices for painting timber rather than brick or concrete. See above for why.

Keeping it COOL

Fancy your picnic food cold rather than lukewarm? Our report on three types of cooler comes just in time for the holiday season.

IN A NUTSHELL

- *The coolers with a hard plastic shell keep the drinks cool for longest, but they're also the most expensive type.*
- *A cheap polystyrene foam cooler works comparatively well, though it's less durable.*
- *Some of the soft bag coolers tested are easy to use, but don't work as well as the other types.*

Off to the beach or the park for a picnic? We tested a range of family-sized … ehm, coolers to see which ones keep your food and drink cool the longest. (You probably call them eskies, but it's a brand name, so we'll stick with the term cooler.)

In our test were five coolers with a hard plastic shell and three soft bag-type models, ranging in price from $20 to more than $70. We also included a cheap ($10) cooler made of polystyrene foam, to see how it compared with the more expensive types.

WHICH TYPE?

The hard plastic coolers worked best — see note 2, right, for how we tested. They're also the most expensive type, usually made of an insulating foam material with a hard plastic shell for extra insulation and durability. Some of them have a lockable lid, so a wind gust won't blow it away; some lids are reversible and have indentations so you can safely rest a glass or food on top. The profiles, above, list aspects of their features and ease of use.

The three soft bag coolers tested were the poorest performers, keeping our test soft drink cans cool for much shorter periods. They're quite easy to use and to store when empty, though, and will probably do the job on a shorter outing. Two of the three bags tested leaked water when we tested for leaks, so if you want to use ice in it, choose the one that didn't (the **IGLOO Picnic Pack**).

The five plastic coolers cost from around $42 to $77; the soft bags from around $20 to $60. If you're after a cheaper alternative, the polystyrene foam cooler in our test worked comparatively well — better than the soft bags and nearly as well as one of the hard plastic models. At around $10, it may be the one for you if you need it just occasionally and avoid rough handling. It won't last as long as the others. ■

Profiles The coolers are profiled in rank order with

The three coolers pictured below worked best. Moving the **COLEMAN CoolRunner 34 quart** (left, $69.95) over hard surfaces is made easy: you can pull it along on two wheels. On the beach, though, you'd have to carry it by its handles, which are hard to g Its lid is reversible. Unfortunately it's been discontinued, but you may still find it in some shops. The **THERMOS Weekend 32 L** (mid $61.80) has just one large handle, which is uncomfortable to ho when the cooler is full. Its lid is lockable and reverses to hold glasses and nibblies. The **WILLOW 33 L Cooler**'s lid is lockable, to (right, $42).

TIPS

- *Cool your food and drinks before you pack them in the cooler.*
- *Fill empty spaces with frozen ice bricks, crushed ice or ice blocks.*
- *Keep the cooler in the shade.*

Brand / model (in rank order)

COLEMAN CoolRunner 34 quart (32 L
THERMOS Weekend 32 L
WILLOW 33 L Cooler
THERMOS 30 Qt 28 L
ESKY Hamper 36 L
ARCTIC 26 L Medium Cooler Chest
IGLOO Picnic Pack 31.7 L
COOL CARRY Ultimate Family Hampe
ANTARCTICA 30 L Cooler Bag

WHAT TO BUY

COLEMAN CoolRunner 34 quart	$69.95
THERMOS Weekend 32 L	$61.80
WILLOW 33 L Cooler BEST BUY	$42.00

The three soft bag coolers below won't keep your food cold for as long as the rigid-wall coolers, but they could be adequate for an afternoon out. The **IGLOO Picnic Pack 31.7 L** (left, $59.95) was the only one of this type tested that didn't leak, but it's difficult to carry with one hand. It has two compartments (one soft and one with a hard plastic bin) with separate lids and side pockets. Both the **COOL CARRY Ultimate Family Hamper 35 L** (middle, $40) and **ANTARCTICA 30 L Cooler Bag** (right, $20) are easy to carry and use, but leaked water. The **COOL CARRY** has been discontinued, but you may still find it in some Target and Kmart shops.

PHOTOS: RHONDA THWAITE

he three coolers above did a little less well in the thermal efficiency est. The **THERMOS 30 Qt 28 L** (left, $77.45) is the easiest to use, but also he most expensive of the lot. Its lid is hinged to the cooler and a strap olds it upright. The **ESKY Hamper 36 L** (middle, $47.95) has a drain hole hat'd be handy if you used crushed ice in it. Its lid is lockable, but difficult to remove, and it's quite uncomfortable to hold by its thin handles. At $9.95, the **ARCTIC 26 L Medium Cooler Chest** (right) is good value for money for occasional outings. However, it's quite uncomfortable to carry and will probably deteriorate long before other models with a sturdy plastic exterior covering the foam.

PERFORMANCE

1 Overall score (%)	2 Performance score (%)	3 Ease of use score (%)
87	90	80
77	78	73
76	76	77
72	65	87
69	68	70
67	64	73
57	53	67
56	45	83
53	40	83

SPECIFICATIONS

Type	Weight (kg)	Fits 2.0 L soft-drink bottles upright	Warranty (years)	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Price ($)*
Hard plastic	3.9	✓	5	USA	Coleman Co.	69.95
Hard plastic	2.5	✓	3	UK	Canadian Thermos Products	61.80
Hard plastic	2.8	✓	5	Australia	Willow Ware	42.00
Hard plastic	2.7	✓	5	Canada	Canadian Thermos Products	77.45
Hard plastic	3.9	✓	4	Australia	Nylex	47.95
Polystyrene foam	0.6	**(C)**	1	Australia	Expanded Plastics	9.95
Soft bag	1.5	**(C)**	5	China	Igloo Products	59.95
Soft bag	0.9	✓	ns	China	AZ Designz	40.00
Soft bag	0.7	✓	ns	China	Smash Enterprises	20.00

* *Prices are what we paid in August/September, 2001.*

ns *Not stated.*

(A) *This model has been discontinued, but you may still find it in shops.*

(B) *This model has been discontinued, but you may still find it in some Target and Kmart shops.*

(C) *Fits them, but some not upright.*

1 Overall score

Performance contributed 70% to the overall score, ease of use 30%.

2 Performance score

We filled the coolers to just over a third of their capacity with cool 375 mL cans of soft drink (including five temperature-measuring cans), put them in a temperature-controlled lab at 40°C and measured in one-minute intervals how long it took for the drinks to warm up by 15°C.

The top-scoring cooler took more than 13 hours, the next two models more than 11 hours and the three coolers in the middle of the rankings around 10 hours. The three soft bag coolers warmed up the drinks in around six to eight hours.

3 Ease of use score

We assessed how easily and comfortably the cooler can be carried by the handle(s), loaded and unloaded and the lid fitted and removed. All three aspects are weighted equally.

RECALLS & BANS

If you find a recall or ban not on our list, please let us know. Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after the recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

THE PRODUCT: Ford Motor Company of Australia has recalled **Ford 1600 kg and 1800 kg heavy-duty towbar goosenecks** (steel tongues) supplied separately and as part of the Ford Heavy Duty Towbar Kit, and suitable for the following kinds of vehicle: AUI/II Falcon, Fairmont, Fairlane, LTD (including all sedan, wagon and utility body shapes); EF/EL Falcon, Fairmont, NF/NL Fairlane, DF/DL LTD (all sedans); XH Falcon utility/van; PE Courier and Explorer vehicles. The affected goosenecks were manufactured from March 2000 to July 2001.
The problem: The gooseneck may snap, resulting in the trailer completely separating from the towing vehicle.
What to do: Don't use the affected 1600 kg and 1800 kg goosenecks. Contact an authorised Ford dealer to arrange for the part to be replaced at no charge. For more information call Ford's Customer Relationship Centre on 1800 333 306.

THE PRODUCT: Oriental Merchant has recalled **Farmer Shandong Peanuts** (in shell), sold through Asian retail stores in 180 g packs, with "no preservatives", "product of China" and a best-before date of 28.08.02 printed on the packaging.
The problem: The peanuts may contain salmonella.
What to do: Don't eat them. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund. If you've eaten them and experienced symptoms such as vomiting, diarrhoea or persistent abdominal pain, contact your doctor. For further information contact: Oriental Merchant, 10 Westgate Drive, Laverton North 3026; phone (03) 9250 8133; fax (03) 9250 8100.

THE PRODUCT: Marlows/Rocca Bros has recalled **Raizall 3 in 1 Jackramp**, sold from November 1997 to June 1999 in SA.
The problem: It doesn't meet structural integrity test requirements of mandatory Australian Standard AS/NZS 2640:1994.
What to do: Don't use it. Return it to the place of purchase (Rocca's store) for a refund. For more information call head office on (08) 9249 9777.

THE PRODUCT: Nissan Motor Company (Australia) has recalled **Nissan R50 Pathfinder vehicles** with VIN ranges from: JN1TAWR50A0 016552 to 018380 and JN1VAWR50A0 016554 to 018378.
The problem: The brackets used to attach the two gas struts to the rear door (hatch) may bend, resulting in the strut(s) detaching from the bracket(s) when the rear door is opened or closed. If both struts detach the door will rapidly fall down.
What to do: Contact any Nissan dealer to organise for replacement of the two gas strut mounting brackets at no charge.

THE PRODUCT: Honda Australia has recalled **Honda Insight vehicles** with VIN ranges from JHMZE1350 IT200001 to IT200126.
The problem: Terminal connections may be faulty, which could cause the headlights to fail.
What to do: Contact your Honda dealer to organise for repairs to be made at no charge.

THE PRODUCT: Peugeot Concessionaires Australia has recalled **Peugeot 306 MY 2001 CPA 10175 model cabriolet vehicles,** manufactured from January to March 2001, with the following VIN numbers or ranges:
VF37DRVE33108494 to 33108496
VF37DRVE33110505
VF37DRVE33111727
VF37DRVE33113810
VF37DRVE33127283 to 33134558
VF37DRVE33136594 to 33145067
VF37DRVE33146027 to 33185326
VF37DRVE33186450 to 33186451
VF37DRVE33186453 to 33186455
VF37DRVE33186471
VF37DRVW33108491
VF37DRVW33127279 to 33146978
VF37DRVW33162410 to 33163895
VF37DRVW33186428
The problem: There's a possibility of rear brake hose damage, as a heat shield wasn't installed during manufacture.
What to do: Contact any authorised Peugeot dealer immediately to arrange to have a heat shield installed free of charge (in around half a day).

THE PRODUCT: Cannondale Australia has recalled **Raven II bicycles** (model years 2000 and 2001) with the following model numbers:

MY 2000:	MY 2001:
700 SX	800 SL
800	2000
900 SX	3000
1000 SL	4000 SL
2000 SL	4000 SX
4000 SL	

Replacement frames for any of the above models (under warranty) are also affected.
The problem: Some of the frames have failed at the bottom bracket/swing arm pivot area, which could cause loss of control of the bicycle — a frame that isn't reinforced has a higher risk of failure.
What to do: Don't ride it. Return it to an authorised Cannondale dealer for a reinforcement procedure at no charge.

THE PRODUCT: Styrox Australia has recalled children's **Floaties brand EVA bubbles** (learn-to-swim devices), from batches 0107-03-07-010, 0407-03-07-010 and 0707-03-07-010, sold from July 1991 to September 24, 2001.
The problem: The bubble has a buckle attachment that can undo during normal use.
What to do: Don't use it. To receive a refund of the cost of the bubble (and postage), return it to: Styrox (Aust), PO Box 461, Mona Vale 2103. Write your name and address clearly on the reverse of the package. For more information call Styrox's Customer Information on (02) 9979 7432.

THE PRODUCT: Altronic Distributors has recalled **Powerhouse DC-AC inverters** with the following model numbers and identifying details:
M8042 (12 to 240 volt pure sinewave),
M8142 (12 to 240 volt mod sinewave),
M8146 (12 to 240 volt mod sinewave),
M8153 (24 to 240 volt mod sinewave).
The problem: The inverters are only designed for use in a standalone application where the electrical appliance (drill, motor, television, etc) is connected directly to the three-pin power outlet on the inverter via the standard 240 volt plug on the appliance. It's possible for dangerous voltages to occur at the battery terminals when the unit is connected to the fixed wiring of a building, caravan, boat, etc, say in order to provide mains power in lieu of a standard reticulated 240 volt mains supply. This could result in electrocution and/or fire.
What to do: Don't use it in fixed installations. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund. For more information phone Altronics on 1800 670 072.

THE PRODUCT: Electrolux Home Products has recalled **Chef gas single door wall or underbench ovens** sold from July 2000 until August 2001, with serial numbers from 03170025 to 13470018, and the following model numbers: GOCE670BS-N&P, GOCE670S-N&P, GOCE670SA-N&P, GOCE670TN-N&P, GOCE670TR-N&P, GOCE670W-N&P, GOS610S-N&P, GOS610W-N&P, GOS630K-N&P, GOS630S-N&P, GOS630W-N&P. The model and serial numbers are printed on the model identification label, which can be seen on the front of the oven with the door open — it's between the door and the oven cavity.
The problem: In some situations there's a slight risk of heat damage to the oven's internal components. This could cause them, and possibly the surrounds, to char, with the remote risk that the oven could ignite.
What to do: Call 1800 001 218, Monday–Friday, 7.30 am–5.30 pm (EST), with your model and serial number, to arrange for a service technician to visit and modify your oven at no charge.

THE PRODUCT: Kong's Australia has recalled the following aquariums: **AlfaPet Complete 5 Gallon Octagon Aquarium** and **Tom New Aquatic Décor — Nature's Window**, sold from January 1997 to September 2001.
The problem: The aquarium lights have not been correctly earthed and so pose a risk of electric shock and fire.
What to do: Don't use the aquarium. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund. For more information contact Kong's Australia on (02) 9796 1811.

Weekly updates of recalls and bans are posted on www.choice.com.au. You can also email us any recalls or bans not on this list at ausconsumer@choice.com.au.

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To whet your interest, here are some picks from the current information available on www.choice.com.au.

IN THE GOOD OLE SUMMERTIME...

Check our site for a range of information to help you enjoy the hot season.

- For sunscreen info, type 'sunscreen' into the search box on the home page — and 'sunglasses' for help on what to look for before you buy a pair.
- For yummy summer recipes click on 'food' in 'browse by category' on the home page, then on 'recipes' on the right-hand side. You'll find roasted kumera, beetroot and chickpea salad, baked ricotta with roasted vegetables, baked whole bream/snapper with wild rice stuffing, caponata of snapper, healthy dips, low-fat salad dressing, pineapple and passionfruit cheesecake, home-made ice cream, fresh juice recipes, frozen fruit smoothies, home-made muesli and more.
- For home-cooling advice, type 'your cooling options' into the search box and click on the article — there's information to help you keep your home cooler, a quiz on 'getting cool, staying cool' and more.
- If you're keen to get slim, type in 'lose weight'. There are links to take you to our healthy weight calculator (to work out if you really need to lose any), our most recent assessment of diet programs, and why you should give diet pills and potions a miss. Type 'exercising for health' in the search box for the lowdown on being active, with a link to our exercise quiz.

CHOICE Books have plenty to offer to help you get the most from summer, or simply while away the days. Just click on 'Choice Books' at the bottom right of the home page, then on the sidebar link to 'A-Z of CHOICE Books' — save time and order books online.

- For those who'll be hanging around the eastern states for the holidays and don't relish the idea of spending a fortune (and who does?), we've three titles to help you holiday on the cheap: *Free and Low-cost Sydney*, *Free and Low-cost Melbourne* and *Free and Low-cost Brisbane and the Coasts*.
- *Sydney For Kids* is a special guide to venues and over 200 activities for those with littles to consider. And *Kids Games* and *Baby Games* are handy no matter what state you live in.
- Our *A-Z of Gardening Hints* can help with lazy days in the yard — good reading with an iced tea in hand.
- *The Hard Word* book's a fun, ligh read, say to take to the beach or po into a Christmas stocking.
- Cricket season inspires more tha the donning of whites — it's long inspired journalists and literary gian *Bat & Pad*, an anthology of writings Australian cricket, is ideal for those who love both the game and its literature.
- If you're thinking of swimming at home, our *Pool and Spa Owners' Gui* has plenty of useful info to consider when building, and to help you keep the water safe and sparkling clean, including easy-to-follow diagrams.

KENT NEXAS

CAFFEINE QUIZ

So you're on your second cup of tea after a breakfast latte and the usual instant or two to kick-start those dre meetings — you're feeling OK but you're not sure how your body's coping. Click on 'food' in 'browse by category' on the home page, scroll down to 'quizzes' and click on 'caffei quiz'.

It'll calculate the amount of caffeine you eat and drink and wheth the amount's within acceptable level or not. You just fill in how much of ea kind of caffeinated beverage, chocola and so on you have each day, and it'l work out the daily total milligrams of caffeine and the equivalent number o cups of strong coffee.

You can also read more on caffeine's good and bad effects by clicking on the links to our report.

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ABN 35 799 246 568. **Registered office** 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204. **Telephone** (02) 9577 3333. **Fax** (02) 9577 3377. **Subscription enquiries** (02) 9577 3399. **CHOICE Consumer Services** (02) 9577 3399. **email** ausconsumer@choice.com.au. **www**.choice.com.au.

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BECOME A FRIEND OF THE CONSUMERS' ASSOCIATION

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The Australian Consumers' Association is completely funded by our subscribers, book purchasers and other customers. We don't receive ongoing funding from government or any commercial source. Your donation or bequest to ACA will assist our work of informing and representing Australian consumers. To make a donation or for further information, call Megan (pictured) on (02) 9577 3399 or write to: Friends of ACA, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.

Sleepy's Mattress Outlet

*Try one of our beds at home for 60 days... if after 14 days you are not completely satisfied with your purchase, we will exchange it!† It's that simple!**

†On equal or greater value merchandise.

Two weeks, two months ... what's the difference?

If you've only got 14 days to return the mattress, surely that makes days 15 to 60 of this 60-day trial somewhat redundant?

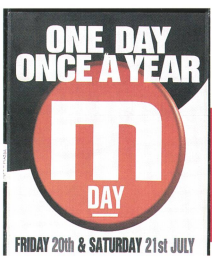


Image thieves bowled for a duck?

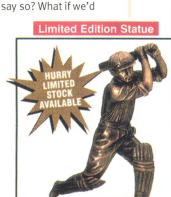
Ever wondered who the Cricketer of the Century is? You won't be any the wiser after reading this ad for a limited-edition statue of said cricketer, for our anonymous hero is otherwise only referred to as "the great man".

The batting stance of the COTC looked familiar, so we rang the advertiser, who confirmed that the COTC in question was none other than the boy from Bowral, the Don, our Don Bradman. But why not just say so? What if we'd thought it was Lara, Tendulkar, Boonie or some other legend, and spent $1750 (yes, that's correct) for the wrong bloke?

Why indeed. We asked the Bradman Foundation that very question and were told that the statue is unauthorised merchandise — perhaps the distributors thought by not mentioning the name, they wouldn't be contravening the Foundation's exclusive rights to its use.

However, the 'cover drive' image is also registered by the Foundation, and its unauthorised use or reproduction is a breach of trademark — not to mention downright unAustralian!

The Foundation tells us it's taken action to ensure the image of Bradman is used only for good (cricket development) instead of evil (profiteering).



THE CRICKETER OF THE CENTURY

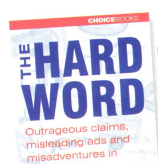
Another advertiser unable to count the days ...

SPACE AGE OR SPACED OUT?

We thought it a little incongruous that you'd need "pressure relief" when sleeping in the weightlessness of space, so decided to investigate the space age claims of Tempur foam mattresses a little more carefully.

It seems the foam is used in spacecraft seats for cushioning against the enormous G-forces experienced during take-off — hardly the right time for a relaxing snooze! And astronauts usually sleep in bags tethered to fixed objects — not on nice comfy mattresses. So what planet were they on when they came up with "A foam so advanced they sleep on it in space"?

A FOAM SO ADVANCED THEY SLEEP ON IT IN SPACE!
TEMPUR
PRESSURE RELIEVING PRODUCTS
Recommended internationally by more than 50,000 medical professionals.
If you are seriously concerned about a good night's sleep, you can now experience the most advanced technology ever used in the development of mattresses and pillows.
Any astronaut will tell you, NASA would not spend billions of dollars sending them into space without calling on the latest worldwide advances in the study of human physiology.
NOW AVAILABLE FOR YOU the unique Tempur® material was developed by NASA for the US Space Program to provide maximum comfort and pressure relief for astronauts.
The Tempur® Sleep System offers you the most relaxed sleep of your life. It will help you to find relief from neck and back pain too, so you won't



OUT NOW!

Order early to make sure you get your Christmas copies of *The Hard Word* book on time — see page 40.

HOW ABOUT A LITTLE HELP?

The Hard Word would like to thank all the readers who've responded with examples of outrageous ads, promotions and products. Thanks to C Nottage, G Briner, L Hooker and G Wilson for their contributions to this month's *Hard Word*. Please keep sending them in.

If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to *The Hard Word*, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, or email your suggestions to thehardword@choice.com.au.